

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO

**GAMES OF THE
YEAR 2023!**

Who will win? Your
guide to PS5's
unmissable
new hits

**NO.1 FOR
PS5**

→ FIRST LOOK!

grand theft auto

Vice City! Dual heroes!
Alligators! Inside the
biggest GTA ever

→ EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

SUICIDE SQUAD

KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Have the creators of Arkham Knight found
the formula for co-op superhero success?

**CRAZY TAXI
RETURNS WITH
MULTIPLAYER ANTICS**

HOW VIC REEVES
INSPIRED COAL
SUPPER'S
'SLAPFORMER'

**HANDS-ON WITH
TEKKEN 8'S
ELECTRIC
STORY MODE**

→ EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
**ACE ATTORNEY
TAKES THE STAND**

Capcom talks Apollo's
return and the series' future

→ IT'S DRAGON SEASON
**MONSTER HUNTER
WILDS GOES BIG**

The true MH World sequel is set
to be a stunning beast battler

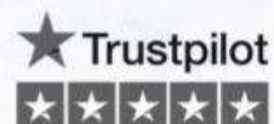
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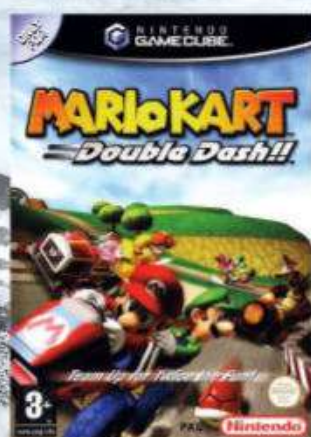
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Welcome



Welcome, dear reader, to a brand new year. We hope you found some time to tackle your backlog and enjoy chilling with some games while you recharged. But there's no slowing down for

PlayStation, as there's heaps to look forward to arriving imminently on the platform.

Though that doesn't mean you should overlook the year that's just gone, either. We've got our Game Of The Year awards (p54) to highlight the best games of 2023 as chosen by our critics and yourself (if you remembered to vote), and hand out additional awards for the experiences that shouldn't be missed. Give it a read and note down anything that takes your interest!

When it comes to the year ahead's blockbusters, though, few have raised more questions than *Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League* (p38). Centring supervillains instead of the usual capes, it comes from the creators of the *Batman: Arkham* games but with a very

different approach. Rocksteady has been kind enough to chat with us all about it, and the answers are quite illuminating! We can't wait to see how the final game shapes up next month.

While the games are more of a known quantity, talking with the developers of *Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney Trilogy* (p46) is no less interesting, digging into *Apollo* as *Phoenix's* successor and pondering the series' future.

But who can forget *GTA VI* (p6)? Due to arrive next year, in 2025, it's set to be the defining game of the 2020s, and sees a return to Vice City. Having Bonnie-and-Clyde-like dual heroes could lead to one of the series' most compelling narratives yet, and the focus on modern video-based social media looks set to evolve the series' trademark dark humour.

We've also got the expert verdicts on *Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora* (p70), *Teardown* (p78), *Arizona Sunshine 2* (p74) and more! We hope you have as much fun reading all about it as we did putting together. 2024 is already shaping up to be a great one for gaming on PlayStation, and we hope you'll join us for the ride as we experience it all!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR

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GAME OF THE MONTH
Chants Of Sennaar
BEST SQUAD
The Phantom Thieves

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THIS MONTH'S TERRIFIC TEAM



Luke Kemp
CONTRIBUTOR

Deployed into Pandora, Luke's become a proud member of the Na'vi and sworn enemy of Gargamel's forces.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Teardown
BEST SQUAD
Gotham Knights



Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR

Reina has caught Jess' interest in *Tekken*. Could a new devil gene main be up for grabs to lead her to victory?

GAME OF THE MONTH
Granblue Fantasy: Versus
BEST SQUAD
Velvet Crowe's crew



Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR

Looking forward to returning to Vice City, Mim's ready to master flying the Dodo again.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Warhammer Age Of Sigmar: Realms Of Ruin
BEST SQUAD
Ichiban's seedy pals



Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR

What's Photoshop? Milf's been carving out each of those Game Of The Year awards by hand before scanning them in.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Teardown
BEST SQUAD
Beauty And The Beast Unit

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THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

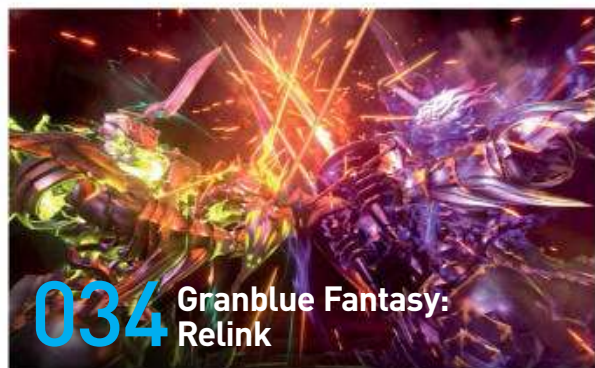
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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

Lucia starts the trailer in jail, but ends it committing a robbery. Er, progress!

Imagine committing a robbery, only to see that several witnesses are streaming your shenanigans on GTA's internet. ■

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A GTA for the social media age

Is Grand Theft Auto VI hinting at a new way to get caught committing #crimes?

We always hoped that little-known PS3 game Grand Theft Auto V would get a sequel someday. Fortunately Rockstar Games gave us an early Christmas present in the shape of the first trailer for GTA VI (in fact, we got to see it *extra* early, after hackers leaked the trailer, the cads). We got a look at protagonist Lucia, some stunning shots of bustling Vice City, and a possible hint of how crime might be reported in the first Grand Theft Auto in **checks notes and gulps* ten years*.

After feasting our eyes on some lovely pink-hued skies, we meet Lucia in prison. When asked if she knows why she's there she responds "Bad luck, I guess," making her as coolly unrepentant as the finest GTA protagonists. Then we get our first look at Vice City as it is now, decades on from the original GTA Vice City's '80s setting, and nearly 20 from that game's release.

Based on the most famous city in Florida, Vice City looks *magnificent*. A lusciously lit Miami-aping metropolis complete with golden coastline just begging to be explored. Yet our initial, breathtaking, view of the place is punctuated by a plane trailing an advertising banner, asking 'Why sixty nine when you can nine 1 nine?'

Yes, 2025's biggest game has just been revealed to be a contender for the title of 'most incredible city sandbox ever made', and the developers couldn't resist flinging in a 69 joke. Good to see you haven't changed, Rockstar.

VICE IS NICE

Once we enter the city proper, the party truly starts. Vice City's streets are rammed with NPCs. They're dancing to DJ sets, soaking up rays at the beach, and respectfully enjoying the artistic medium of dance at a strip club. If this is really the number of people we can consistently expect on screen then we're not sure our PS5s aren't going to burst into flames. Rockstar's eye for detail is sharper than ever, and the graphical leap from Grand Theft Auto V is sky-high. The internet is

What's surprising is now much of the trailer is made up of social media posts.



already speculating on whether one moment, when security camera footage shows an alligator strolling into a coffee shop (it's flat white Friday, you loser?), is FMV or actually in-game.

But we were all expecting a stunning city. What's far more surprising is how much of the trailer is made up of social media posts, broadcast on whatever the game's version of TikTok will end up being called (perhaps they'll go with TikCo... actually, let's leave this to the experts). We see posts of a man wrestling a pool net from an alligator, a naked fellow fleeing the authorities, and someone making a



RETURN TO VICE

If you've recently replayed PS2's Vice City (hopefully not in the dismal 'Definitive' edition) then you might've spotted a few familiar locations in the trailer. We think we saw the Ocean View Hotel, Tommy Vercetti's safe house!

> rude gesture at whoever's filming (captioned with 'only in Leonida is a crotch grab an apology for bad driving'). Interestingly, we also see some police body cam footage, as the cops kick down a door and run into a building.

Could Rockstar be commenting on how the way we report crimes has changed dramatically since GTA V came out in 2013? Almost all the social media posts in the trailer seem to be showing criminal activity. Nowadays, when everyone can share live footage from their phone instantly, what's to stop NPCs filming your crimes and sharing them online? Imagine committing a robbery with Lucia, only to see that several witnesses are streaming your shenanigans on GTA's internet, sending your wanted level skyrocketing. What if we had to hack witnesses' social media feeds to delete the footage, or make deepfakes of us helping old ladies across the road instead of robbing them?

Perhaps we're getting into Watch Dogs territory here (and if any studio loathes hackers right now, it's this one) but it'd be a brilliant way to make the studio's latest crime sandbox feel truly next-gen. It'd be incredibly ambitious, but when has Rockstar ever lacked ambition?

STOLEN OUR HEARTS

As for the crimes themselves, we see Lucia and her partner robbing a convenience store. It's pretty small-scale compared to the audacious heists we pulled off as a trio of protagonists in GTA V, but we guess even hardened criminals have to start somewhere.

Heists were some of the last game's most exciting set-pieces, so we've got huge expectations here. If with Lucia and her pal Rockstar's going for a riff on Bonnie and Clyde – and everything we've seen so far points to exactly that – then perhaps you actually *want* witnesses to

film your crimes and post them on social media, making Lucia and her partner crime-spreeing celebrities. Imagine speeding from the cops, deliberately showboating for NPCs' livestreams, screeching to a halt in your hideout, and then watching clips of your robbery trending while you count the loot. Grand Theft Auto has always had a strong satirical streak. How better to comment on the rise of social media fame than having two criminal influencers as your leads? #burningdownbuildingswithmybae

The trailer truly is an embarrassment of riches. The guy in a thong casually watering his garden (with his hose, thankfully). An older woman wielding two hammers – we're already terrified of her. A billboard promising a wonder drug that 'cures emotions'. Bookending all this wonderful chaos is Lucia, telling her partner that the "Only way we're gonna get through this is by sticking together. Being a team. Trust?" Oh, we trust all right. We trust that Rockstar just showed us our first tantalising glimpse of the best Grand Theft Auto yet.

★ What do you want to see in GTA VI? Tell us at play@futurenet.com

How better to comment on the rise of social media fame than having two criminal influencers as your leads?



One of many sublime shots of the beaches. That's our holiday plans for 2025 sorted.



1 We haven't washed our eyes once since watching the trailer. Could this be the prettiest game on PS5? **2** A nearly-naked man tends to his garden. Nudist gardening minigame confirmed? **3** The ever-reliable Weazel News is warning of a new biker gang terrorising the city. **4** Meet Hammer Lady, the *true* star of GTA VI! (We're only saying this so she won't hurt us.) **5** Will Vice City's beaches really be this crowded in the finished game? Rampages on the sand are going to be *wild*.



STUDYING THE BLADE

To celebrate 50 years of everyone's favourite half-vampire full-vampire-hunter, Arkane Lyon (behind the amazing Deathloop) is working on a Blade game. Microsoft-owned publisher Bethesda won't comment on Xbox exclusivity. Will we get it?

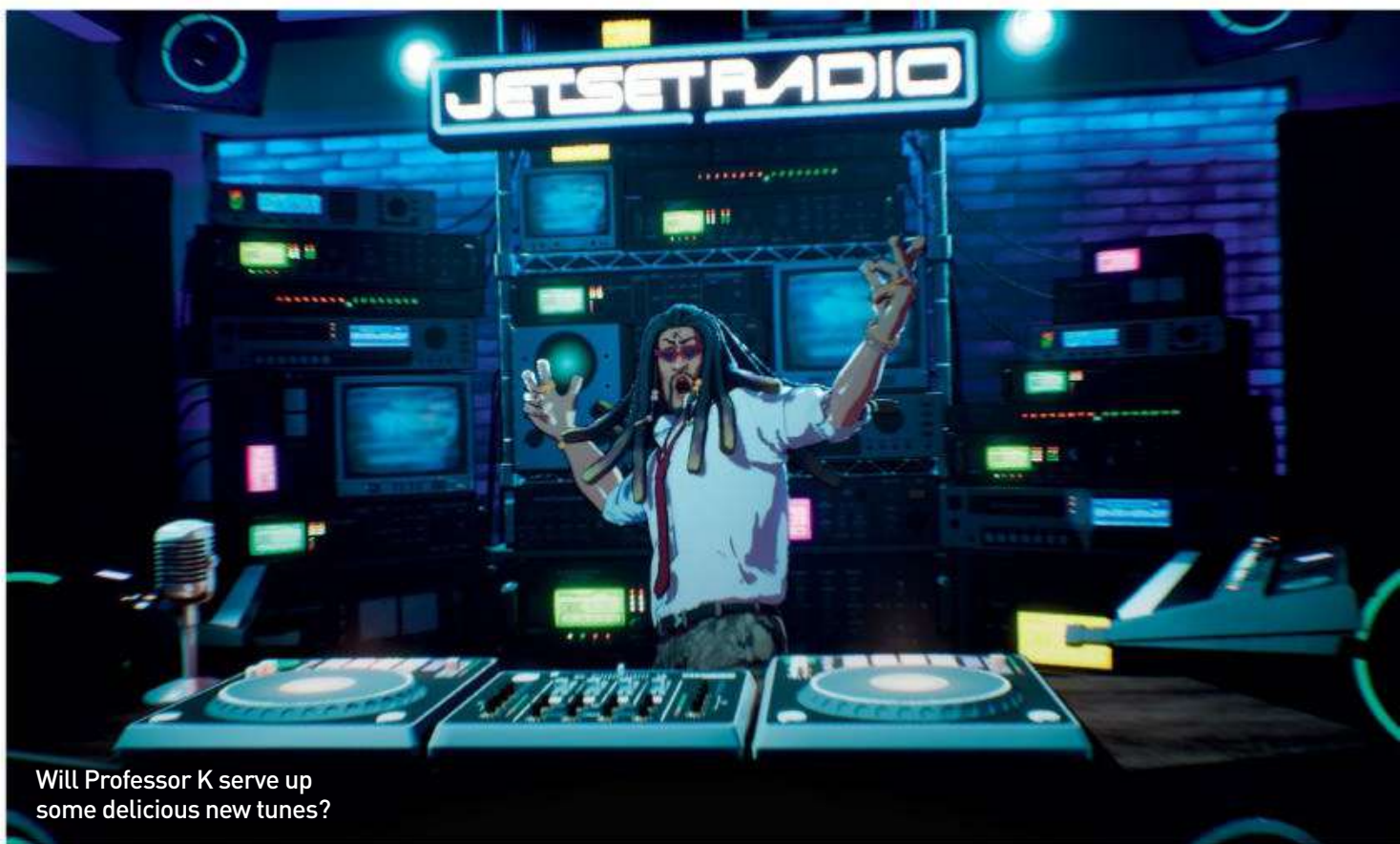


Ixnay from the TK Oscar unpacks the latest goss

As we reach the end of game award season (with our own on p54, we've peaked surely?), I can't help but ponder the state of the industry's pillar events. While The Game Awards last month likes to bill itself as one of the shiniest, the most recent felt like it was treading water a bit. Devs, press, and fans in the audience alike were quick to point out the brutal 30-second timer on acceptance speeches, trying to dissuade **industry icons** from thanking their teams with a "please wrap it up" message before shoving yet more ads in our faces. We've always been an industry in love with trailers, but coming at the expense of celebrating its creators feels a bit much, especially given last year was unprecedented in terms of industry layoffs, which will take literally years to recover from in some cases. Devaluing moments like these in turn devalues creatives, enabling mass layoffs in the first place. All I ask is that devs get the space to **celebrate properly** in the years ahead.

From ages past

Jet Set Radio, Golden Axe, Crazy Taxi, and more – Sega teases classic revivals



Will Professor K serve up some delicious new tunes?

Sonic is responsible. While a phrase not always uttered positively (like when we blame the Blur for any lunchtime soup spillages at PLAY Towers), this time it's a good thing. Sega is digging out its classic series, and according to Shuji Utsumi, Sega Of America CEO and co-COO of Sega Corp, it's thanks to Sonic's recent blazing successes.

The series that are making a return are Golden Axe, Streets Of Rage, Crazy Taxi, Shinobi, and Jet Set Radio. We're told this is just the start, with potentially more to come (gosh, we're hoping for more Space Channel 5). Collectively given the tagline 'new era, new energy', the goal seems to be not just to bring these games back, but to reimagine them with modern twists.

BLAST PROCESSING

You can stop cringing – it's not all talk, and so far those modern twists don't seem to be missing the mark. Everything we've seen to date seems to be sticking faithfully to the spirits of these properties. Shinobi, for instance, is returning to its 2D roots, but instead of pixel sprites we've lush hand-painted-style graphics that look a bit Mark Of The Ninja-like.

Jet Set Radio is, visually at least, building on the foundations of the arcadey original rather than Jet Set Radio Future. Showing off parkour action in addition to roller skating, and some tremendous verticality, it's

enticing, even if Bomb Rush Cyberfunk appears to have better captured the cel-shaded aesthetics.

Co-op brawlers Golden Axe and Streets Of Rage look like the biggest departures from the originals, their side-on beat-'em-up action shifting into a 3D space. The former's fantasy action looks appropriately grand, with Gillius Thunderhead's strikes packing impact, and even some dashing atop Chicken Leg the cockatrice. The latter spotlights side-on street brawling before cutting to a car park where the fists fly more freely in space, the punch-up sprawling in all directions. Crazy Taxi, too, seems to be teasing multiplayer antics, with our drivers being chased by the police, who appear to be playable.

So far these evolutions seem neat enough, though, cynical as we are, we're expecting some sort of rug-pull live service reveals or similar (in line with Sega's 'super game' pitch from a few years back). But for now it's great to see these classics get some more love.

* All the games are at different stages of development; release dates to come.

Lies Of PLC

With upcoming DLC and a sequel tease, this puppet is hankering for an encore

We rather enjoyed this year's Bloodborne-like Lies Of P, giving it a very respectable 7/10. The upcoming DLC that's been announced could fix our few issues with the game, namely some dull locations and too many 'surprise' multiphase boss fights. Oh, and can our damn nose grow longer when we lie this time?

Of the two bits of teaser art released, however, one has us a little worried. It seems to depict a waterworks, which risks making our eyes turn on the waterworks too. We found Lies Of P's industrial locations to be its duller. A pity, because the developers loved factories, to the point we started wondering if they would rather make a game set in an Amazon warehouse. (Actually, that might be too bleak, even for a soulslike.)

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

Fortunately the other piece of art (seen here), is far more promising. Pinocchio's on a ship! Not the most relaxing voyage, mind, based on those corpses hanging from the mast and the fact it's seemingly smashed into another vessel. That glimmer of golden light and Northern-Lights-aping green beam in the skies hint at an opulent destination. Could he be setting sail for Pleasure Island? We'd love to fight our way through that isle of vice and sin. Just imagine trying to beat a boss while you're simultaneously turning into a donkey. We could finally check that off our bucket lists. One early boss fight in the main game was with the 'Mad Donkey' so

■ Just imagine trying to beat a boss while you're simultaneously turning into a donkey. ■

it's not like we haven't had hints of this before. Better yet, have us swallowed by a whale! One of the things that frustrated us most about the main game was that it didn't fully embrace the wonderful absurdities of the source material. If this DLC corrects course, we'll be first in line for this puppet show's encore.

★ Lies Of P is also getting a sequel, but we've no release date for that or the DLC.

Let us lie our nose into a plank and make the crew walk it.

DEV ACCESS

Proper chuffed

Coal Supper tells us how a Yorkshire town became the backdrop for comic adventure **Thank Goodness You're Here!**

You wouldn't think a small town in North England would make a particularly interesting location for a game, but **Thank Goodness You're Here!** proves you wrong. Developer Coal Supper has turned the apparently quiet town of Barnsley into a stage for an absurdist comedy adventure where smoked kippers are dead fish sucking cigarettes and grocers are engaged in fruit-based warfare with their customers.

"Surrealism is the best vehicle for delivering on one of our key ambitions, which is to surprise and delight the player," Coal Supper developer Will Todd says. "I think there's also an appeal in making something that feels like it could be sort of highbrow but is actually just really daft."

Here, the daily rituals, hometown oddities, and vibrant characters usually found in small towns have been cranked up to 11. Playing as a travelling salesman and a fresh face in Barnsworth (based on the real UK town of Barnsley), you've got some time to kill before having an important meeting with the mayor so decide to get acquainted with the area by helping the colourful locals with their odd jobs and partaking in some cheeky antics.

Coal Supper's previous game *The Good Time Garden* – a short, surreal experience of a throbbing, squishy pink world of strange naked creatures – was the first time the studio had explored the intersection of surrealism and comedy (and never came to PlayStation). But for their second game the team weren't sure if TGTG's absurdist psychedelia would work over several hours of playtime, so the solution was for their next release to begin in a more grounded way, with the surreal elements ramping up over time.

"The first drafts of the game centred around the idea of these interactive vignettes of 'the domestic', which placed the setting firmly in a town or city," Todd says. "As we explored what the player would do in this world, and what the characters looked and sounded like, the town started getting closer and closer to our hometown of Barnsley. At some point we decided to lean all the way into that,

putting in a lot more British, and specifically Northern, iconography."

LIFE OF PIE

The characters are important in conveying this sentiment. The cast is filled with small-town folk – a butcher, greengrocer, fishmonger, postman, and the like – but each one feels like an exaggerated Northern caricature. One of the biggest personalities is a loveable lump of a man called Big Ron, the local pie shop owner.

"Big Ron is particularly close to my heart," Todd says. "His character design is largely unchanged from his appearance in the first bits of concept art, and the line 'Give your wife the best, give her Big Ron's Big Pies' from his TV ad [heard in the reveal trailer] is one of those me and [fellow

■ We both sit in a dimly lit room together, trying to make each other laugh. ■

developer] James have been shouting back and forth to each other for years now."

When you first meet Big Ron, he's calling to you from inside his shop. "Thank goodness you're here!" he proclaims as he tells you he's run out of ingredients for his iconic pies and asks you to fetch more. He's one of many oddly loveable, if slightly unhinged, characters, all of whom have been completely voice-acted by Northern talent. The Yorkshire-isms are out in full force and are only made better by the warmth and neighbourly tone that the cast brings to the characters.

"Myself and James write all the material and do a lot of the voices ourselves, but we



You have the option to slap any object in the game, leading to some fun bits of animation.

reached out to a bunch of comedians and had them come to sessions in a proper recording studio," Todd says. "There's also a bit of room for improv, and everyone so far has really embodied the characters – Em Humble had us in absolute bits listing off types of vegetables as beleaguered teenaged store clerk, Florence."

Accompanying the VO is the game's bold visual style. There's not a sharp edge or pointy corner in sight; everything in this world is soft and curved. It's a style that Todd compares to the Beano comics, and "those strangely horny postcards you get in seaside towns in the UK." Another big influence was the TV adaptation of Vic Reeves' *Big Night Out*, an offbeat and surreal comedy show that helped the team pin down the overall tone of the game.

Ultimately though, the comedy came naturally to Todd and Carbutt. Whatever they have in store, we're sure it'll have us spitting out our brew. "The core of our process has remained largely unchanged: we both sit in a dimly lit room together, trying to make each other laugh."

★ **Thank Goodness You're Here!** will arrive on consoles some time in 2024.

1 Locals will need your help with truly bizarre tasks. **2** Big Ron is a sweetheart, if slightly unhinged. **3** Your adventure will take you through Barnsworth's (accurate) back streets.





Price Shaggers is the perfect place to get your wettest peas.

The flight fantastic

Monster Hunter ventures out into the Wilds in 2025

2018's *Monster Hunter: World* introduced a more seamless approach to the action, seeing you hunting big beasts across multiple linked areas. 2023's *Monster Hunter Rise* increased those maps by adding verticality, allowing you to move not just onwards but upwards. *Wilds* expands the scope even more, seeing you chase your quarry through grander open areas, dashing between larger mobs of monsters, and at the mercy of enhanced weather effects. Between sand storms and lightning strikes, you'd best watch your step.

There's no word yet on the return of palicos or palamutes, but we do know a trusty blue steed gets you from A to B. This not-so-little-birdie has got it all, zig-zagging between lumbering pack animals on two legs, picking up speed on all fours, and closing the distance by gliding through the air. Oh, the places you'll go (with such a wide range of motion)!

Wilds remains a way off, though developer Capcom is planning to reveal more information this summer. Stick with us for all the info.

Numbers Game

We do the maths

109,000

Milliseconds of new Metaphor: ReFantazio footage debuted at the Game Awards. *Why* must we wait till autumn to play Atlus' next RPG?

33

Percent of Baldur's Gate 3 players romancing shape-shifting druid Halsin asked him to *bear* it all for them. Each to their own...

£269.99

What the Tekken 8 Collector's Edition will cost you, sulky Jin figurine and Leroy Smith ring included.

21

Years separate Beyond Good & Evil's PS2 debut and its just-announced 20th Anniversary Edition remaster.

90,421,491

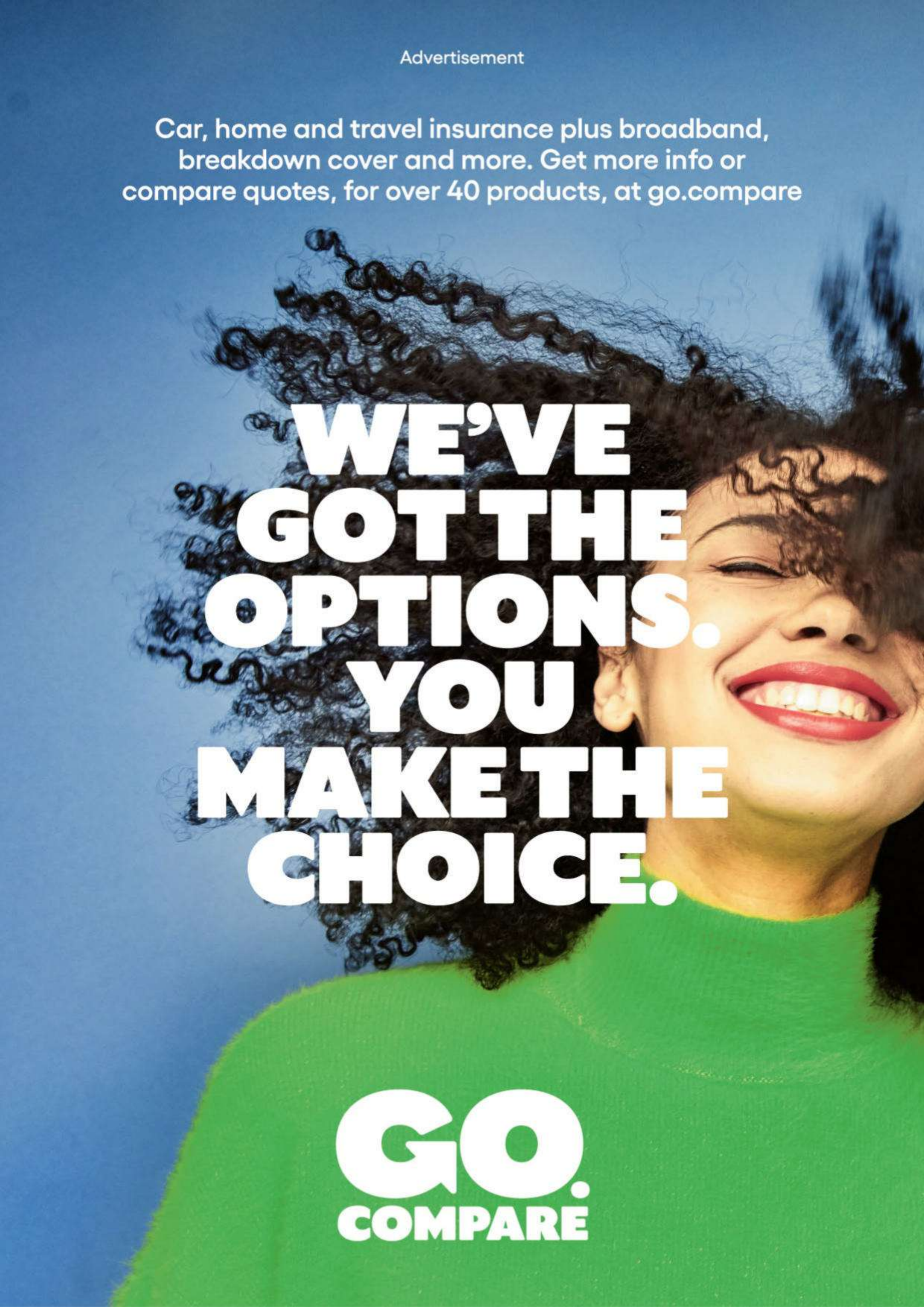
Times Grand Theft Auto VI's debut trailer was viewed in its first 24 hours online. Now that's one hell of a score!

170

Millimetres tall: Pop Up Parade's just-announced Juri figure. They'll be fighting in the streets over this one.

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breakdown cover and more. Get more info or
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IN
THE
MOOD
FOR...

Sisters

Whether they're younger, older, or twins, these are the best of our skin and blisters

1 RESIDENT EVIL

Big brother Chris might have the STARS training but Claire Redfield is just as capable at taking down zombies without it. They may not get to see each other often, but she still finds the time to go after her bro while conducting her own dangerous investigations into bioterrorism. What a dutiful little sister.

2 NIER: AUTOMATA

They're twins, but they're also robots. Popola and Devola are technically not blood relatives since they're androids, but that doesn't stop them caring for each other and working together for thousands of years. All major plotlines are better when they're revealed by twins, we reckon.

3 TEKKEN

It's normal to have sibling rivalries. It's not normal to want to kill each other on a regular basis like Anna and Nina Williams. It's also frowned upon to assassinate your sister's fiancé on their wedding day and then run off in her wedding dress. What did their parents do to mess them up this much?

4 A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE

Amicia is a dutiful sibling to poorly little Hugo despite his naivety (well, he is only six years old). She's such a good big sister that she hopes to save him despite the whole 'controlling the swarms of plague-ridden rats that are killing everyone' thing. That's a lot of responsibility for a 15-year-old.

5 FATAL FRAME II: CRIMSON BUTTERFLY

More twins – but spooky ones. Mio and Mayu may have a close bond, but that doesn't help if you're pulled into a ghostly lost village and made to perform a ritual sacrifice to stop darkness from spreading. Sibling slaughter isn't how a walk in the woods is supposed to end.

6 FINAL FANTASY XIII

A bond so strong that Serah and Lightning get a game each to save each other. Sure, that connection might involve both of them slaying gods and lots of visions of the end of the world, but at least they're good at taking turns with it. Sharing is caring, after all.

7 ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

We know you shouldn't pick a favourite when it comes to children, but when it comes to Cassandra we can't help it; she's clearly the superior sibling. Unfortunately, you'll also discover what happens to siblings when you *do* favour one over the other. Oops.

8 MORTAL KOMBAT 1

At one point in history Milena and Kitana were clones who fought fiercely against each other, but after some playing around in the timeline they are now officially twin sisters, and loyal ones at that. Kitana now does her best to support Milena in her rule and keeps her unpleasant giant teeth disease under wraps

9 UNTIL DAWN

Somehow, *more* twins with a grisly fate. Hannah and Beth are wonderful sisters to each other and their brother, even though he's a jerk. Sadly for them they're chased off a cliff and one year later become the source of a spot of undead bother at a cabin. Can't blame them, though – the victims totally deserved it.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Bioshock

They may be creepy, but the genetically altered Little Sisters can support you on your travels in the sunken setting of Rapture.

Soulcalibur

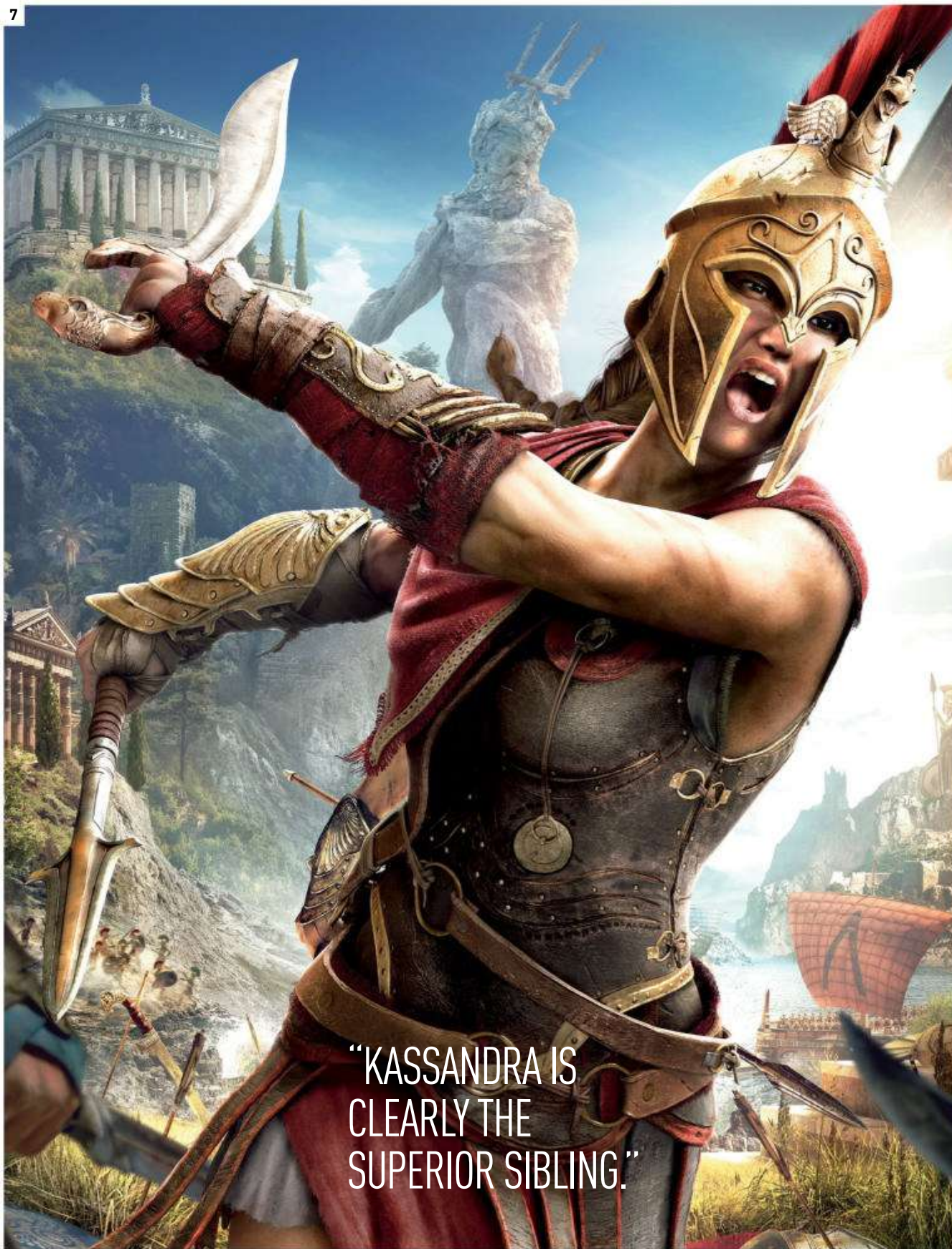
Fighting games sure do love to make sisters fight – poor Sophitia and Cassandra. At least they patched it up in time for the wedding.

Far Cry New Dawn

Bonus twins! Mickey and Lou lead bandit group the Highwaymen – it helps to have a sister by your side when you're spreading terror.

Did we miss a super sister? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag





OPINION

"CALL OF DUTY'S DESCENT INTO LIVE SERVICE NOW SEEMS INEVITABLE."

All those changes players hate? They're not bugs, they're features



WRITER BIO

The only thing Luke Kemp enjoys more than moaning about COD is playing it. It's a complicated long-term relationship.

What an awkward, lumbering beast COD has become. Call Of Duty HQ is 90GB of nothing, a huge storage footprint that's essentially useless without further add-ons to facilitate campaign or online play. But view this through the filter of dedicated live service plans, and its new form almost, kind of, *sort of*, makes sense. The evidence is circumstantial, but also mounting.

It's embarrassingly obvious that somebody at Activision is aching to get on getting COD to ape Fortnite, with no desire to hide its inspiration. This goes way beyond Warzone, its well-established me-too battle royale. It even goes beyond the battle pass, a system which, of course, is now uncomfortably common across the industry. Speaking of the battle pass, though, have you noticed how the redesigned version – with 'tokens' and 'sectors' – is suspiciously similar to Fortnite's, with its Stars and limited control over the order of unlocks?

It didn't take long for COD's online element to include microtransactions, but licensed skins – a core part of Fortnite's identity – is a relatively new development. If I had a time machine, I'd love to go back and see what COD players in 2019 would make of licensed comic characters and Poundland Frozen

and X-Files ripoffs running around their multiplayer matches (though I hasten to add that if I had a time machine, this wouldn't be the first thing I did with it).

Going back to COD HQ, the awful one-stop shop (with the emphasis on shop) for accessing multiple Call Of Duty titles, this approach makes little sense with Activision's current business model. Existing players don't appreciate the extra hassle to boot up a game they've already paid for, and how many copies of Vanguard is the studio expecting to sell in 2024? Awkwardly shoving multiple games from the series into a single launcher without warning doesn't make sense... unless this isn't the end goal.

CAPTAIN PRICE INCREASE

With Modern Warfare III we have seen, for the first time in series history, a game that carries over weapons and cosmetics from the previous entry. Although there's a strong case to be made for the idea that this is simply due to the reported truncated development time and original DLC plans, it's important to realise that this isn't a decision that will have been made lightly.

Now that the COD community has been given the ability to carry items over from one game to the next (including pricy purchases), there will be uproar if this feature is removed as suddenly and unexpectedly as it was announced. It feels like groundwork for a live service reboot to me. The alternatives are (a) to risk huge blowback from an angered community by walking back the decision, or (b) to place severe restrictions on what can be done with multiplayer in all future games.

I'll be surprised if there is no announcement that COD's going full live service within the next 18 months. I expect campaigns and their associated messaging to stay, at least initially (Activision has tight and disturbing military ties, but that's another article), and microtransactions to grow. Free-to-play or not, there will never be a shortage of ways to spend your money on colourful guns and new Operator skins.

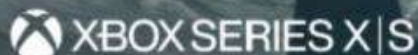
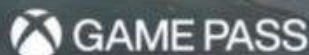


Live service: the end of campaign mode? After last year's effort, this might not be a bad thing.

■ This goes way beyond me-too battle royale Warzone. ■

STILLWAKES THE DEEP

COMING 2024
WISHLIST NOW



OPINION

“SPIDER-MAN 2’S BOSS FIGHTS GO IN A DISAPPOINTING DIRECTION.”

In a game celebrated for traversal, don’t give dull bosses more health



WRITER BIO

James Daly is a writer and producer who is obsessed with all things Persona and Yakuza. He also has an orange cat named Arty.

Marvel’s Spider-Man 2 is an excellent game. It’s got wonderful characters, a compelling story, a map that feels truly alive, traversal to die for, and a PLAY 9/10, meaning the superhero sequel is a must-play. However, there’s an enormous blemish on the otherwise spectacular title: the boss fights.

After the previous games, we’re used to Spidey – be it Peter or Miles – taking on supervillains in order to save New York City. Facing anyone from Doc Ock to the Tinkerer, these exchanges usually centre on dealing out damage while dodging blows. While they get a bit samey, there’s no doubt that they make you feel like Spider-Man. Well, Marvel’s Spider-Man 2 goes in another direction, and the result is anything but superior.

In too many boss fights in Marvel’s Spider-Man 2, your opponent has multiple health bars. Whether you’re fighting the Lizard or Scream (who we won’t go into detail about because *spoilers*), you’re tasked with putting them down only for them to get another phase, with Scream getting four!

Now, there’s nothing wrong with multiple phases for boss fights, but an overreliance on them can cheapen the mechanic. Just look at Lies Of P: it’s a sumptuous soulslike, but far too many bosses demand you

effectively fight them twice in a row. The core difference, though, is that the bosses in Lies Of P offer genuinely fun and engaging fights (for the most part), whereas Marvel’s Spider-Man 2 simply doesn’t. Playing as Peter or Miles, many boss encounters demand parrying, but the process of preventing a hit landing isn’t so satisfying. The enemy telegraphs the unblockable attack that has to be parried, or so the game tells us, and you oblige before getting back to beating your opponent to a pulp, eventually reducing their HP to zero. Then they inexplicably get up and off you go again.

STAY DOWN

Whether you’re scrapping with Mister Negative, Kraven, or anyone else, no battle in this game is enjoyable enough to merit multiple phases. Instead they feel stiff, like poorly developed tutorial bosses, with simplistic movesets. Then there’s another issue: none of these skirmishes make you feel like Spider-Man, and the parry mechanic is a big part of that.

When you imagine Spidey getting attacked, is he blocking or parrying? Neither; he’s dodging. The hero can avoid physical contact more often than not because of his spider-sense, so parrying isn’t a natural reflex for the webhead most of the time, and yet Insomniac saw fit to add this as a basically mandatory combat device.

The final problem with milking these boss fights by adding so many health bars is they keep us from doing what we really want to in a Spider-Man game, which is traverse New York. The sequel’s version of NYC is bigger and prettier, so to keep us away from it for an extended period is agony.

Marvel’s Spider-Man 2 is a wonderful game with moments that will last a lifetime (I’ll probably always cry when I hear Seabird from now on) but the litany of multi-phase boss fights and focus on parrying keeps it from feeling like the evolution we really wanted. Let’s hope Insomniac has different ideas for Marvel’s Spider-Man 3.



Just give us the satisfaction of beating a boss once. Properly. Definitely. Let us do the job!

■ No battle is enjoyable enough to merit multiple phases. ■

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OUT NOW

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OUT NOW

SECRETMODE A LITTLE TO THE LEFT

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OUT NOW

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AVOID ELIMINATION AND FIGHT YOUR WAY TO THE FRONT OF THE HERD IN THE SCRAMBLE TO BE CROWNED CHAMPION!



COMING SOON

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PICK UP TRASH, EXPLORE THE VIBRANT WATERS, AND TAKE CARE OF AXOLOTL-LIKE ALIEN CREATURES!



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE STILL WAKES THE DEEP

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Previews



"THROWING
DOWN WITH
SWORDS."

034 Granblue
Fantasy: Relink

026 Tekken 8

The queens are ready for the
King Of Iron Fist tournament



HIGHLIGHTS

HAUNTII 030 | BITS & BOPS 032 | LUTO 033 | JURASSIC PARK: SURVIVAL 036 | LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE 037
DRAGON BALL: SPARKING! ZERO 037 | THE CASTING OF FRANK STONE 037 | VISIONS OF MANA 037
UMURANGI GENERATION VR 037 | SKULL AND BONES 037 | THE RISE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL 037

Something wicked this way comes. New challenger Reina is definitely not all that she appears, boasting Mishima-style moves that *sting*.



“REINA HAS THE ELECTRIC
WIND GOD FIST – AND IT’S
JUST SO SATISFYING!”



FORMAT PS5 / ETA 26 JAN / PUB BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
DEV BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT, ARIKA / PLAYERS 1

Tekken 8

Airing out the family business

Sometimes not even eye lasers are enough. Jin Kazama has failed to beat his own down-for-destruction devil daddy, Kazuya Mishima. As if that wasn't bad enough, the defeat was so devastating it locked Jin's own devil gene away. Worse still, Mishima has thrown down the gauntlet to all of humanity, resurrecting the King Of Iron Fist Tournament with world-altering stakes: lose to Kazuya Mishima, and you'll see your home country struck off the map.

The situation's dire enough, but now a new challenger appears – one who calls dear old moody boy Jin... 'senpai.' Is your skin crawling yet? Well, it ought to be, because this gal's bubbly, happy-go-lucky routine is deceptive – in the ring, the mask comes off.

PLAY FAVOURITES

Reina is one of several fresh faces joining what will be an impressive lineup of 32 fighters at launch. She's joined by brand-new challengers Victor Chevalier and Azucena Milagros Ortiz Castillo.

Founder of the Raven Unit, Victor is not one to be trifled with, wielding swords and guns and dishing out close-quarters strikes without splitting a seam on his suit. He's voiced by French film actor Vincent Cassel, of Eastern Promises and Ocean's Twelve fame.

When we chat to game director Kohei Ikeda, he tells us Peruvian mixed martial

artist Azucena is his favourite of the new recruits. Often seen sipping a cup of joe brewed using beans from her family's coffee farm, Azucena's fighting style is every bit as lively as you'd expect.

Game producer Michael Murray, translating on behalf of Ikeda, explains the director likes her, "Just because he's a big fan of coffee [as well]."

Murray goes on to share that Azucena also "has a stance where she can beat attacks automatically. It feels really good and feels like you're really strong."

As for Murray, Reina is his favourite of the newbies – he points to her purple-

and-black colour theming as one reason for that. Her outfit reminds us of that of real world pro wrestler Rhea Ripley, though Murray and Ikeda tell us they were "not aware of that," making any resemblance purely coincidental. Murray explains that, to flesh out Reina's visual design, the team worked with Mari Shimazaki, the illustrator who designed Bayonetta, plus Tekken 7's Josie and Kazumi.

Murray says Reina's fighting style is another draw. "I'm a Mishima player, and she has the Electric Wind God Fist – and it's just so satisfying! And her personality – I like villainous characters. So far, you know, it's hard to tell if she's a nice person or a bad person. It's hard, but she does have a duality."

He also reveals that the idea for Reina originated during the development of Tekken 7, describing her as "a central part of the story arc".

FACTRICK

1. VOICING VICTOR

Vincent Cassel, who voices one of the new contenders, has been a fan of Tekken since the '90s.

2. FRENCH FIGHTER

Cassel also practised martial art capoeira in real life, and maimed Eddy Gordo as a result.

3. NOT SO NEW

Returnee Jun Kazama hasn't been playable since Tekken 2 and non-canonical Tekken Tag Tournament 2.

TRACK RECORD

It's just shy of seven years since the last mainline Tekken title jumped into the fray on PS4. A previous incarnation of this magazine gave that fighter a 9/10 – will 8, powered by PS5, be a total knockout?

PREVIEW



1

» Wardrobe aside, that sense of difficult-to-read duality also shows up in Reina's moveset. A tap of triggers Nobility Hunter, a move which starts as a backwards-flicking kick but writhes into a forward-facing palm strike. She's a tricky one for sure, so we head into Arcade Quest to get better acquainted.

Separate to the story and arcade modes, Arcade Quest sees your custom avatar hopping towards greatness via a series of tutorials with a light narrative wrapping. You're accompanied by Max, the so-called Tekken professor, who offers a wealth of advice regardless of your skill level. Beginners get a whistle-stop tour of the basics (such as each limb being tied to a face button and the series' love of air combos) before getting the low-down on 8's new Heat mechanics.

Beneath your fighter's health is a blue bar you can tap into once per round. Pressing activates Heat, drawing energy from the bar for an extra wallop. While Heat is active, all attacks deal chip damage, which is great if your opponent is doing their best impression of a turtle.

COOKING WITH GAS

Max suggests a combo that combines everything we've learnt so far and will smash through the opposition's block.

Pressing or and launches an opponent – and Max reminds us fighters are defenceless once you get them airborne. Tapping activates Heat, and tapping again uses up everything left in the tank to unleash the Heat Smash, a new special move that sees Reina plucking her foe out of the air before dragging them face-first along the floor.

This villainess pulls no punches. With bread-and-butter combos like Bishamon Massacre (, , ,) that can easily be chained into ten-hit barrages, Reina is a fast and furious fighter. Lounging on a throne in her intros, bidding challengers to 'Have a taste of capitulation,' it's clear she is aiming for the top of the food chain, and a royal motif threads through her moves. For instance, or plus is Queen Bee Stinger, a sweeping kick that's sure to bring the competition to their knees. Our games editor is head over heels for this queen, and you too may well find yourself among her loyal subjects.

IMPRESSIONS

Boasting current-gen glitz, a robust launch roster, and someone who's no doubt soon to be our favourite villainess, we're chomping at the bit to go a few rounds more with Tekken 8.

2



3



1 Don't talk to us before we've had our coffee! MMA fighter Azucena is energetic, to say the least. **2** Could there still be skeletons biding their time in the shadows of the Mishima family closet? Is there even room for any more? **3** Proficient in many deadly arts, it's hardly surprising Victor trained both Raven and Master Raven. **4** Jin and Kazuya's family drama plays out with global, potentially earth-shattering stakes.



There are few defences against Victor's super-spy fighting style – or indeed his super-spy bullets.



"REINA IS AIMING FOR THE TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN; A ROYAL MOTIF THREADS THROUGH HER MOVES."

Putting yourself on screen

Tekken 8 offers more ways to tell your own story



01 Arcade Quest opens with the words 'Drawn into the world of Tekken – this is your story,' encouraging you to craft your own journey champion avatar.



02 Fresh threads are available for your fighter, with striking items costing in-game Fight Money that you earn from winning bouts throughout Arcade Quest.



03 You can fight yourself, thanks to Ghost data. Uploaded to the server every three online matches, your Ghost will be 'exorcised' if you don't go online for 30 days.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / ETA 2024 / PUB FIRESTOKE / DEV MOONLOOP GAMES / PLAYERS 1

Hauntii

One ghost's journey to escape eternity

Many games have explored what lies beyond the realm of the living (you could say it's been done to death) but Hauntii's evocation of the afterlife is particularly alluring. For starters there's the striking two-tone art style, then there are the ghostly denizens, and finally the sprawling, ethereal city filled with giant hourglasses and towering bridges.

Moonloop Games' afterlife is a big world that you explore as a little guy. The titular Hauntii is a soul freshly reaped from the land of the living. An encounter with an angelic being called Crisp sees our pocket-sized ghost pal attempting to ascend to a higher plane, but during the take-off black chains shoot from the ground and drag them back down. They then decide to journey through the different realms of eternity, hoping to complete their ascension while also finding out more about who they were in their past life and how they died.

At a glance, you'd expect Hauntii to be a charming puzzle adventure, but this ghost has some surprises up their sheet. Hauntii is also a twin-stick shooter, with our ghost protagonist having the power to blast out orbs. Not only can you hurl energy balls at enemies to damage them, you're also able to possess parts of the environment. Shoot

at an object or creature and a gauge will start to fill; when it's full you'll be able to jump into your target and use its powers to solve puzzles and kick ghost butt. One puzzle we play requires us to possess stone pillars and move them to open a portal to the next area. On another occasion we're swarmed by enemies and leap into a crystal to unleash a rapid volley of projectiles, making the two-tone visuals light up with colour and sound. This ability isn't limitless though. To fuel it, you have to gather special triangular pieces scattered around environments and dropped by enemies.

You might not expect a ghost to be able to dodge, but with a tap of a button you can zip to safety, making weaving between enemy shots as you power up your own a breeze. But it's not all action – Hauntii can be contemplative and whimsical too. Spotting a ladybird, we're able to possess it to climb a tree, then use a leaf to glide across to a hidden area. (Adorable!)

GHOST TOWN

Hauntii's object-possession game mechanic is well done, but it's something we've seen in a handful of

games already (Tchia, er, *jumps to mind*). However we've seen it a lot less in twin-stick shooters, and it makes for an interesting twist alongside the slower, contemplative story. It's a strange combination, but it works.

The world brings everything together, managing to be both whimsical and creepy. The first area is a meadow, which you take a delightful jaunt through – but stray from the path and your screen starts to shift, the ambient music begins to distort, and glowing eyes appear in the shadows. At one point a giant entity grabs you in its outsized claw... and then Crisp comes in to save you. They're your guardian angel, your celestial BFF. While initially they appear as a terrifying biblical angel, complete with giant wings and far too many eyes, Crisp eventually assumes a less intimidating normal ghost form.

Dramatic story moments are further punctuated with impressive sweeps of the camera and delicate hand-drawn animation and are always a fun surprise. Overall, though, the story's subtle and intriguing, with the core mystery naturally being who Hauntii was in their past life and how they met their end. You'll be able to piece together answers from memory fragments scattered

throughout each realm, each piece revealing a snippet of the past.

Even though Hauntii is exploring well-trodden ground, it's as full of surprises as a rickety graveyard. The sprawling world of the afterlife and its intriguing mythology have us completely hooked, and the striking visuals and evocative soundtrack help breathe life into a world centred on the dead.

IMPRESSIONS

We may have been given the ability to possess objects in other games, but Hauntii's detailed world and striking two-tone visuals lift this ghostly adventure to an exciting, higher plane.

FACTRICK

1. GHOSTED

Moonloop Games and publisher Firestoke are looking at a mid-2024 release for Hauntii.

2. NIGHT LIGHT

The ambient soundtrack is composed by artist LightReturn, whose credits include The Serpent Rogue.

3. SOULMATES

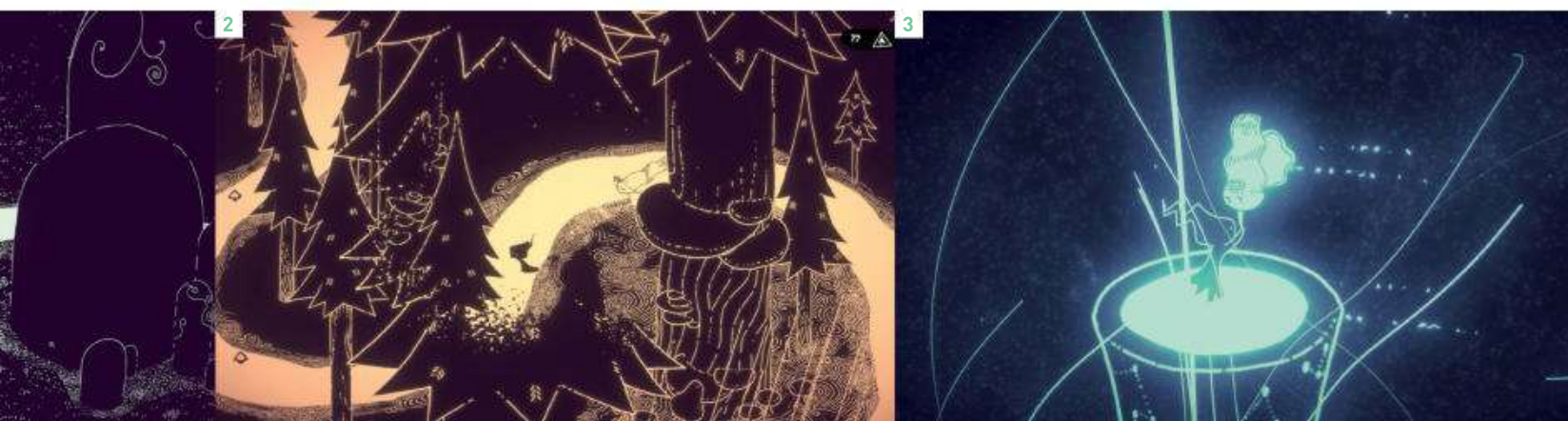
The ghosts you meet aren't all scary. Some are super-friendly and will help you on your quest.



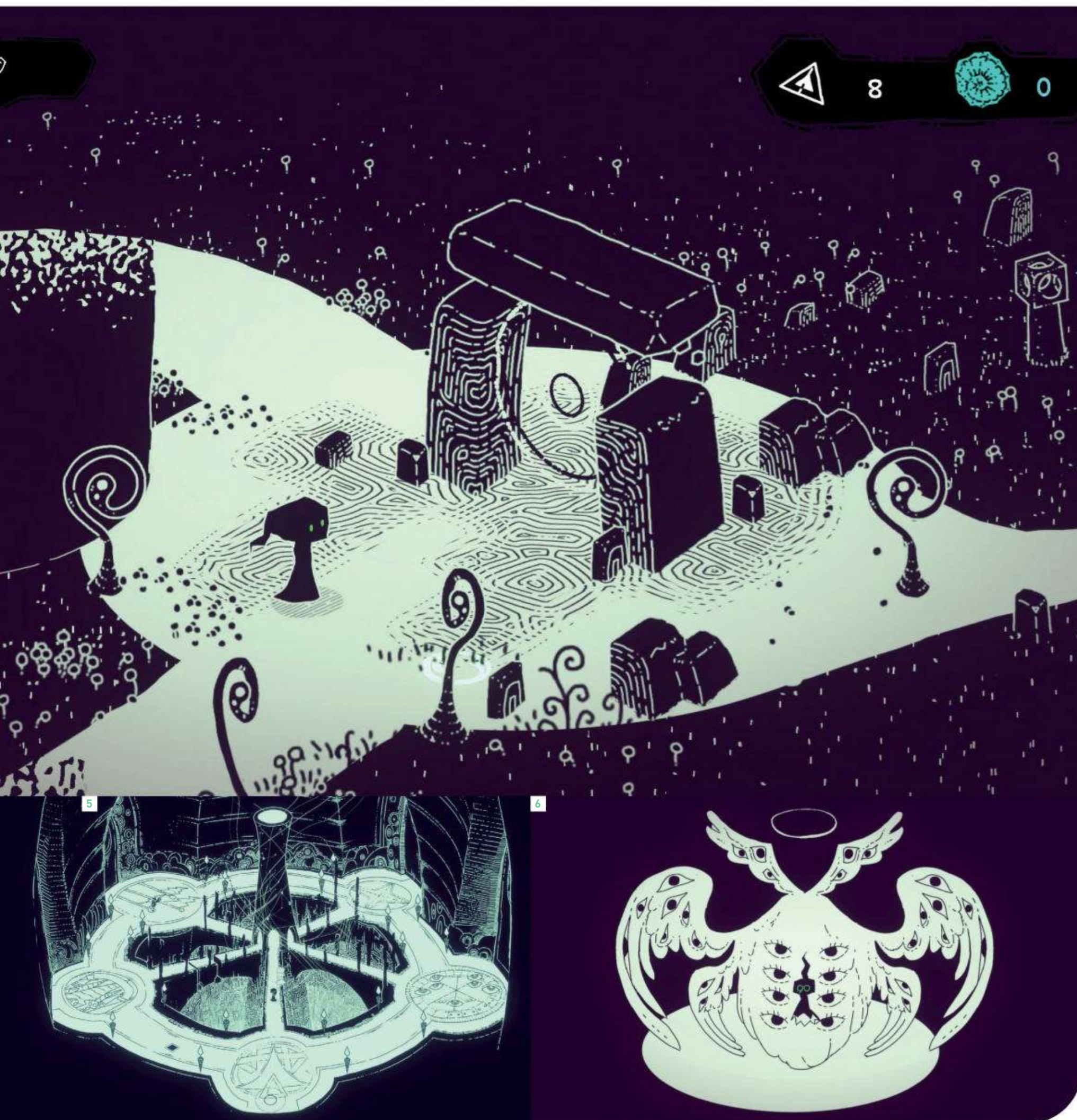
Hauntii is being developed by Leo Dasso, a game designer with 20 years' experience as a game developer. Dasso also studied illustration, which explains Hauntii's striking hand-drawn visuals that look fantastic in still images as well as in motion.



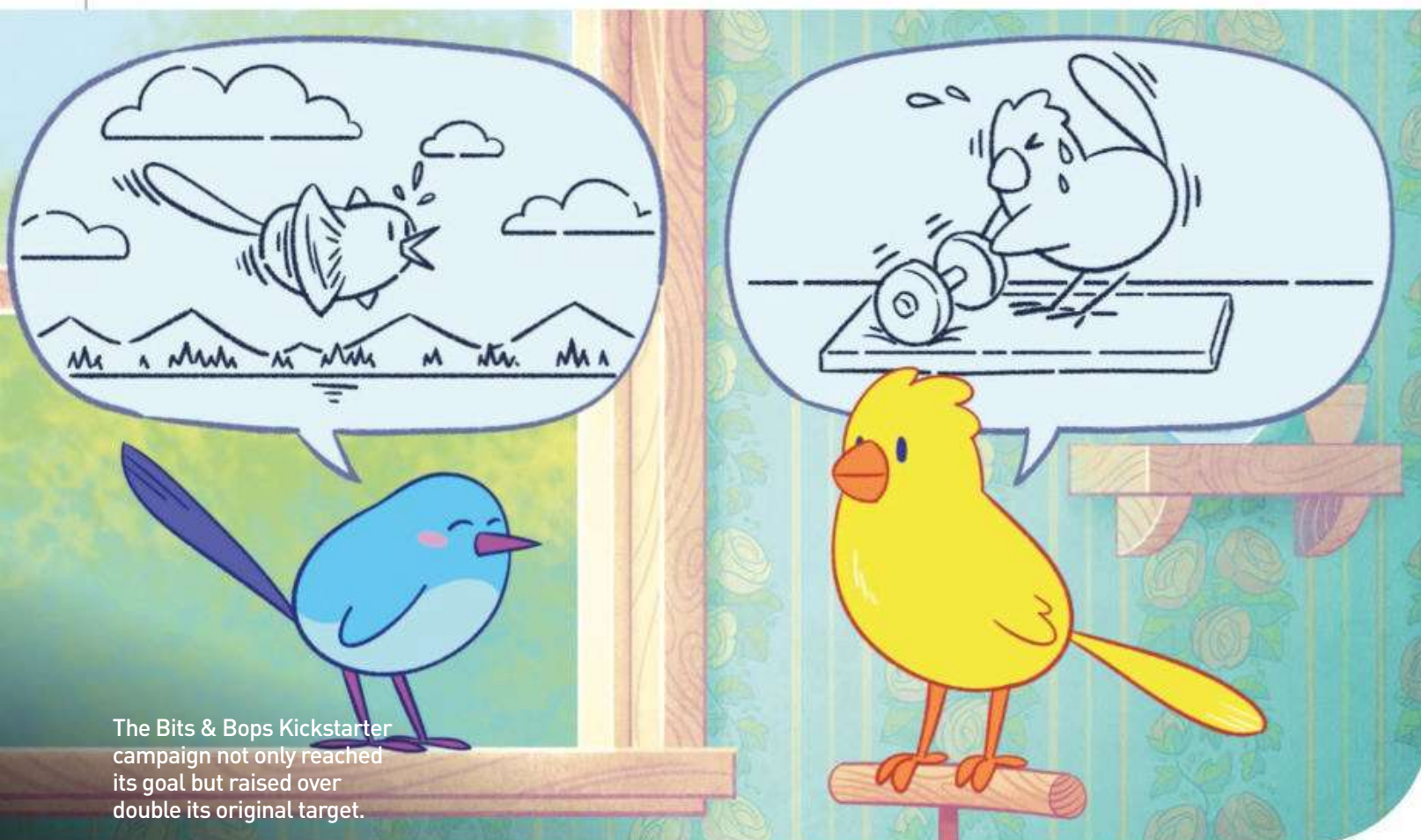
4 The opening area of the game is equal parts weird and wonderful, with strange, curling plants and gentle hills. Just don't venture too far off the path. **5** The ominous tower that sits at the centre is where lost souls gather to ascend to a higher plane. **6** No thank you.



1 A quick reminder: do not anger the small, cute ghost.
2 The woodland realm is home to a group of delightful forest spirits, one of whom is a gentle ghost with a beard and pipe.
3 Hauntii tries to ascend but something pulls them back down into eternity.



PREVIEW



The Bits & Bops Kickstarter campaign not only reached its goal but raised over double its original target.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** TEMPO LAB GAMES / **DEV** TEMPO LAB GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Bits & Bops

Beat bashing, toe-tapping, rhythm action

Fan of fast-paced games? The Bishi Bashi Specials and the Point Blanks? Then we've got great news for you – Bits & Bops is a colourful collection of hectic rhythm

games. The animation is crisp, the characters are fun, and – most importantly – the music is so catchy it'll be bouncing around your head for hours after you've played it.

For our hands-on preview, we're trying out three minigames, all with very different mechanics wrapped up in adorable little scenarios. The first asks us to take photographs of a seal as it pops out of the water to catch a ball on its nose. The goal here is to keep in sync with magnificent creature, which means listening closely to the music. The rhythm indicates how many times our water-dwelling friend will emerge, whether it's just once or three times in a row.

RHYTHM FEVER

Seal snaps in the bank, we move on. The second minigame is an IKEA instruction manual brought to life. It's a simple call-and-response challenge: we've got to hammer in nails in a particular rhythm. The whack of the hammer as it hits the head of the nail feels incredibly satisfying, and the fun little twist of a cat lying on the instruction booklet and occasionally obscuring our view is adorable (even if it does hit a little close to home).

The final level features two birds having a cute conversation – and we're one of those birds. We need to listen to the first bird's triplet of rhythmic tweets

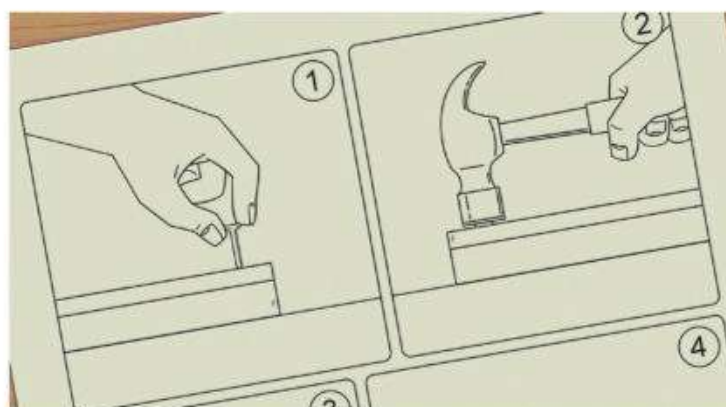
and tweet back with the right timing. It's a trickier prospect than our previous two games as following the beat doesn't feel as intuitive here, the music making

clever use of off-beat and syncopated rhythms. But it does make us want to flutter back for another try, the focus on the beat rather than visuals a real

delight for us and any other rhythm game fans who love a challenge.

IMPRESSIONS

This might well be the rhythm minigame collection genre fans have been waiting for, balancing charm with challenge.



The devs cite Rhythm Heaven as an inspiration, and it shows across the 20 minigames.

ON THE HORIZON

The next six months, mapped out

02
months



DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

The sequel fans have been begging for is almost here – and dare we say it's looking suitably epic?

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 22 MAR
PUB CAPCOM

04
months



SKER RITUAL

Go loud against the Quiet Ones and blast monsters in this round-based action sequel to survival horror title Maid Of Sker.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** APR
PUB WALES INTERACTIVE

06
months



DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE

A delay means you'll have to wait a little longer to get inside the Traveler.

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA 4 JUN / **PUB** BUNGIE



Somebody's been writing on the walls. That's the least of your worries to be honest.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SELECTAVISION / **DEV** BROKEN BIRD GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Luto

With an unsettling atmosphere, this horror has a Luto potential

Silent Hills has had a lot of influence on interactive horror for a cancelled game. There are obvious parallels here – a first-person journey through a claustrophobic house, a rarely-glimpsed figure stalking you – but this is no straight copy of PT. It has a wonderful understanding of creepiness that's all its own.

The number one rule of effective horror is to suggest far more than you show, and that's exactly what our taster demo does. We know we're in the process of moving house, but little more. The precise circumstances, including the loss of somebody close, are muffled by vague hints and the house's bizarre decoration and geography.

HOUSE YOUR FATHER

Our encounter with a figure covered by a sheet should be ridiculous. Instead, it is disturbing. Beforehand things start to feel unsettling, as we register small changes without being able to pinpoint exactly where they've been made, noticing them in our peripheral vision. Then we realise an oddly human-shaped figure amid the domestic detritus has disappeared altogether.

Despite the sheet-covered entity, Luto is, in what we play at least, primarily about exploring and solving

puzzles rather than being chased or getting into fights. We stumble upon strange setups entirely out of place in a house and have to unpick them. For example, in one room a robotic voice monotonously but incessantly says "Help". What's going on?

We'll go back to PT only to emphasise that this is, in some important ways, a different beast from that trailer. Whereas Kojima Productions' gruesome baby rapidly began to evoke terror, at a pitch that it then maintained, Luto's mix of the prosaic and the horrific unsettles and disturbs rather than

terrifies. It's not above the odd jump scare but it generally goes for a more subtle, more easily sustainable, messing with our minds.

IMPRESSIONS

Unnerving surprises leave us looking forward to seeing what the final game has up its icky, mouldy sleeves.



1 'Your dream is failing'? There are lots of confusing and/or gloomy things to pick up in the house. **2** A bit dark, but otherwise it looks nice enough. Well, it does *at first*, anyway.



Primal beasts are hardly a peaceful bunch but there's something strange about Furycane's raging.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / ETA 1 FEB / PUB CYGAMES, INC / DEV CYGAMES, INC / PLAYERS 1-4, ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

Granblue Fantasy: Relink

Dreaming of blue skies ahead

Based on the massively popular mobile game, this is an adventure that's been a long time coming, and we're glad to be going hands-on with it. Throwing down with swords and spells is par for the course, but what we hadn't expected is how cosy this ARPG feels.

First we try out a fairly early part of the game. The crew of the Grandcypher stumble upon the town of Folca, where their quest begins; after meeting relationship-counsellor-slash-handyman Rolan, the gang hurry to push back some fighty goblins at his request. Naturally, the goblins aren't causing a ruckus for fun, there's a far greater disturbance at play.

We head straight to the source of this discord and learn where Relink shines. Picking our battles through huge, gorgeous environments, we scoop up treasure and discover low-key environmental puzzles. Our party then delves into a crumbling mine where the wind *really* picks up, threatening to shake the floor loose under our feet. Legging it, we eventually come to the main event: a boss fight against the Primal Beast Furycane. Joined by a party of AI-controlled adventurers, we weather Furycane's tornadoes, powered-up alternate forms, and attempts to shove us off the boss arena's precipice. It's a spectacular bout,

and only enhanced by the addition of co-op multiplayer.

You can take on fresh quests in Folca, putting together a party of AI-controlled faves or linking up with fellow skyfarers online. At first you'll captain the

Grandcypher as either male protagonist Gran or female protagonist Djeeta. Both offer balanced sword strike combos as an introduction to the rhythm of combat, though there's plenty of depth to be found in between mashing **○**, **△**, **○**, **△**.

NOT JUST HOT AIR

After polishing off Furycane, we're unleashed on a much higher-level save. Our spellcaster Io hangs back, picking her moments with lengthy cast times. We know that keeping the enemy's attention off of her is vital – fortunately Rosetta has plenty of tricks up her flouncy sleeve. Equipped with a dagger that behaves more like a whip, throwing out thorny threads with every tap of **○**. One of her **R1** skills sees her setting up turrets that needle enemies within range, allowing her to apply pressure from multiple angles. As the Boss tries to uproot us, Io finishes casting Flowery Seven, an **R1** skill that unleashes a barrage of fireballs and some of the highest damage in the game. Fighting is a team effort.

IMPRESSIONS

From pushing back goblins to staring down a Primal Beast, this ARPG's combat leaves us wanting more in only the best way. Our hands-on suggests there'll be plenty of depth to find in the full release.

FACTRICK

1. TOTAL DOMINATION

In addition to Relink and Versus: Rising, there's also Granblue Fantasy: The Animation and a manga.

2. SPEAKEASY

Despite never being officially released outside Japan, the mobile game has a good English localisation.

3. BEAUTY AND BEAST

Primal Beasts can range from behemoths like Furycane to smaller beings. You'll meet both in Relink.



Cygames has stewarded all things Granblue Fantasy since the mobile game made its debut in 2014. It's also publishing Arc System Works' Granblue Fantasy Versus: Rising – check out our review of the colourful spin-off fighter on p76.



- 1 You don't need to be a top-class navigator to see that's one foreboding sky. Hold onto something, pals!
- 2 Every rose has its thorn: Rosetta's Skybound Art sees her conjuring a giant, deadly bloom.
- 3 We told you to hold onto something! Relink shows off gorgeous environments before gleefully tearing the rug out from under you.
- 4 Mind those mines! Furycane's thrashing around sees your party members paying attention to every step they take.



Becoming a team player

More ways to keep the party going for massive damage



Rather than staggering enemies, a full stun meter opens them up to Link Attacks. Keep your eyes open and tap **Ⓢ** at just the right moment to join the attack.



Opportunities to unleash flashy Skybound Arts are rare. Time it just right and you can chain it into your pal's Skybound Art for a face-melting Chain Burst.



Co-ordinating Link Attacks and chaining special moves together triggers Link Time. This slows time for enemies, allowing the whole party to pile on.

PREVIEW

Jurassic Park: Survival

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SABER INTERACTIVE
DEV SABER INTERACTIVE / **PLAYERS** 1

Forget about all that 'World' nonsense and wind your clock back to the '90s. This single-player adventure is set right after the events of the first film, throwing you into all the thrilling danger of the classic movie. As Dr Maya Joshi you're trying to survive the fallout of the dino takeover of Isla Nublar, having failed to evacuate with everyone else. That means sneaking your way around all the familiar dinosaurs, from clever velociraptors to T-rexes, while trying to take advantage of their individual behaviours. Game adaptations have always struggled to capture the spirit of the '93 movie. But this could find a way.



Lost Records: Bloom & Rage

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC
PUB DON'T NOD / **DEV** DON'T NOD
PLAYERS 1

Despite its insistence, we can't help nodding – the Life Is Strange studio has been killing it with its output lately. And fans of its previous time-twisty narrative adventure are being well-served here as Lost Records feels like a spiritual successor in all but name – there's indie rock, decorated notebooks, and beer-sipping teen rebellion. Until something goes wrong, that is. In the summer of '95, Swann, Nora, Autumn, and Kat discover a glowing purple enigma deep in the forest before going their separate ways. 27 years later they reunite to finally confront what they saw. A little bit Stand By Me, a little bit It, then, but as this studio is King (at narrative games), we're sure this is no Loser's Club.



Dragon Ball: Sparking! Zero

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC
PUB BANDAI NAMCO
DEV SPIKE CHUNSOFT / **PLAYERS** 1-2

Quick bit of localisation trivia: the Dragon Ball: Budokai Tenkaichi series of 3D arena fighters was, in Japan, called Dragon Ball: Sparking. And it's from the original developer too. (While XenoVerse cribbed the style, it was never quite the same.) Yes, it's become commonplace to joke that almost every anime fighter is a 3D arena one now, but these were the originals and beloved for a reason. Huge rosters and flashy combat recreated the dramatic, over-the-top, planet-shaking brawls that the series was known for. You'd actually crunch opponents square into rubble. All that and more is here, and at a previously unseen level of detail. It's a spark for now, but expect a flame.



The Casting Of Frank Stone

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024
PUB BEHAVIOUR INTERACTIVE
DEV SUPERMASSIVE GAMES
PLAYERS 1

Four teens, miles of abandoned tunnels, and one creepy man in a broken welding mask. What could possibly go wrong? Plenty, we're sure, and we're eager to get involved – but we doubt the game itself will go wrong. A collaboration between Behaviour Interactive (Dead By Daylight) and Supermassive Games (Until Dawn, The Dark Pictures) means we're set for another choice-based, narrative thrill-ride where all our favourites will come to sticky ends and we'll have to play it again out of guilt. Curiously, this is actually set within the DBD universe, making this the first time the lore-dense online multiplayer horror has expanded in this direction.



Visions Of Mana

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024
PUB SQUARE ENIX
DEV SQUARE ENIX / **PLAYERS** 1

All the classic RPG remasters Square has been putting out must be paying off, as joining the recently announced SaGa – the first in aeons – is a new Mana, and it's not a mobile spin-off this time. While it takes cues from the Secret Of Mana and Trials Of Mana remakes, Visions is much more vibrant and detailed, and has a fully 3D camera to boot. Never before has Mana's world felt so alive and ripe for exploration. There are icy peaks, tropical jungles, and, of course, lush meadows to run through, all while you get ready to bash foes in fast-paced melee combat. Naturally the Tree Of Mana will feature as well, with you tasked to escort your childhood friend there in order to refresh the world's mana. But could a twist be waiting?



Umurangi Generation VR

FORMAT PSVR2 / **ETA** 18 APR
PUB PLAYISM / **DEV** ORIGAME DIGITAL
PLAYERS 1

This is a sandbox photography game with a lot to say, casting you as a documentarian of the final days before a looming disaster in Tauranga Aotearoa, a near-future that's a stone's throw from our own ('umurangi' means 'red sky' in Te Reo). Given photo bounties, you need to explore each area and set the shots up, keeping things like composition in mind to net the best rewards – including new gear that'll help you get better snaps. It's the perfect setup for a VR game, with this update pulling out all the stops to keep you immersed, such as making menus diegetic (bounties can be viewed on your wrist). Don't have VR? A flat-screen version will be released simultaneously on PS5 and PS4.



Skull And Bones

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 16 FEB / **PUB** UBISOFT
DEV UBISOFT SINGAPORE / **PLAYERS** MULTI

This time, for real, Ubisoft is promising its pirate game is going to be released. And it's so soon that there seems to be no way the developer can get out of it. But will this be smooth sailing or leave us feeling a tad seasick? To tell the truth, this whole game feels like it's been walking the plank, teetering on the edge of delivering Assassin's Creed IV-inspired greatness while raising the black flag of ill-advised live service. But the prospect of piracy always does have us hoisted.

The Rise Of The Golden Idol

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024
PUB PLAYSTACK / **DEV** COLOR GRAY GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

"Data! Data! Data!" – to solve a mystery, Sherlock Holmes would crave facts, so we're sure he'd be eyes-rolled-back (even without his vices of choice) at the sheer deluge up for grabs across the 15 conundrums here. A '70s-set sequel to the 2022 puzzler (yet to be released on PlayStation), as The Observer you're able to enter a variety of crimes and interact with them as you please, exploring every nook and cranny and making connections. So many connections. You rifle through pockets, learn names, and arrive at motives – all noted down in your dense notebook. Few detective games make you work like this and it's a joy to behold.



SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE



FORMAT PS5 ETA 2 FEB (EARLY ACCESS FROM 30 JAN)
PUB WARNER BROS GAMES DEV ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS PLAYERS 1-4

SQUAD GOALS

From the superheroic brawling in *Batman: Arkham* to assembling a gun-toting band of misfits in ***Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League*** – studio product director Darius Sadeghian talks getting the band together to retake Metropolis

A promotional image for the video game 'Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League'. It features Harley Quinn in the top left corner, looking down with a mischievous expression. In the center, a large, blue, shark-like creature with a wide, toothy mouth is shown. To the right, a large, blue, muscular arm is holding a large, curved blade. The background is a stylized, geometric representation of a cityscape with white and grey lines.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

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here's no denying the phenomenal success of the Arkham games. Since coming out of the gate strong with Batman: Arkham Asylum in 2009, they've all been critical and commercial hits, as well as massively influential on the wider industry. (How many of the games that followed aped Arkham's rhythmic combat and detective vision?) Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League – described as a 'third-person action shooter' – is a direct successor, set in the same universe... but what's making the bat computer beep, whirr, and spit out reams of dot-matrix paper is just how different a beast this new title is shaping up to be.

Gotham City doesn't feature; instead the action is shifting to the brighter, retro-futuristic Metropolis. You can still smash the teeth out of

Unique skills set them apart, but every member of Task Force X (to give the squad its proper name) can easily traverse Metropolis.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

“WE KNEW WE WANTED TO MAKE A FOUR-PLAYER CO-OP GAME, SO WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME ITERATING ON OUR CHARACTERS.”

» bad guys, but you can also riddle them with bullets, darting at more of a distance thanks to arenas that encourage traversal rather than standing your ground. Oh, and – of course – you’re not merely playing as reformed supervillains (well, supervillains behaving lest the bombs implanted within them get detonated), you’re facing up to brainwashed superheroes. Everything’s been flipped.

“For us it was really inspiring to explore this universe from another perspective. To see how the villains view the world, and to put them in a position where they’re challenged, tested, and pushed way outside their comfort zones,” says Darius Sadeghian, studio product director. As the Arkham games explored just about every angle possible from Batman’s perspective, this shift feels immediately fresh. “When we pitched the idea to the team there was just so much excitement in the room and it fired everyone’s imagination,” Sadeghian continues. “At that point it became completely irresistible as a concept, and once we started

1 A lot of thought went into choosing the initial quartet – Deadshot’s precision balances Harley’s anarchy. **2** There’s tremendous verticality to the city, and you’re able to move around with ease. **3** As the areas you fight in are larger than in the Arkham games, guns play a larger role.

exploring the ways we could extend the gameplay from that core of character and story, the game took on a life of its own.”

KILLER QUINN

The idea for tackling the Suicide Squad in particular came from the initial desire to explore multiplayer gaming within the world Rocksteady had created. “We knew we wanted to make a four-player co-op game, so we spent a lot of time iterating on our characters,” says Sadeghian when we ask how the team decided on the squad’s initial four-character lineup.

“There was already a lot of love for Harley Quinn, since she’s got a long history in the Arkham universe and is just such fun to work with,” he says – not to mention fronting her own movies, TV shows, and comic runs. Once just a cartoon sidekick (she



debuted in the '90s Batman animated series), she’s now just as recognisable as the Joker, if not more so.

With Harley as a starting point, the others clicked into place. “Deadshot emerged as a great counterpoint to Harley’s chaos: he’s the serious professional who just wants to get the job done with minimal fuss so there’s already friction there,” continues Sadeghian. “Captain Boomerang is a core member of the Suicide Squad in some of the biggest comic book stories, and his attitude makes it so much fun to write comedy for him. Finally King Shark provides an emotional core for the Squad to rally around. His lack of experience in the



SUICIDE SQUAD: KTJL

outside world means the other squad members feel responsible for him in a way, even though he has his own superpowers and probably needs them the least!”

GUNS BLAZING

There’s some overlap between the four supervillains’ abilities, though each also possesses unique powers. Having a favourite is never going to lock you out of a particular approach or way to play. Each can easily move around the city, pump lead into Brainiac’s forces, close in to deliver a clobbering, and execute impressively animated finishing moves.

“For us it wasn’t so much about making a game in any particular genre,” says Sadeghian on the switch from Arkham’s melee focus to adding gunplay as a pillar. “Rather, the focus is on creating a sense of flow and trinity between all our gameplay systems. That’s reflected in the way the traversal, melee, and shooter elements all blend together when you’re playing.”

The satisfying core of the Arkham series is here, from the impact of crunchy hits to the ability to dodge and counter incoming attacks – it’s just more frantic, playing into the longer-range stopping power the guns offer, and the need to hop around bigger arenas. Counter shots, for



An evil Green Lantern gives the squad a whistle-stop tour of the Brainiac-controlled Metropolis.

instance, take Batman’s reversals to incoming strikes from goons and applies them to gunfights, neatly avoiding the annoyance we all feel when off-screen enemies mow us down (we can think of more than a few games plagued by unfair back attacks).

“It’s been very satisfying to develop and refine a system where you really feel that seamless flow as you use the squad’s traversal abilities to find the perfect angle, and then go all-out to exploit the weaknesses in Brainiac’s troop formations,” says Sadeghian. “It’s a system that rewards the kind of recklessness and chaos that you’d expect from the Suicide Squad, and we’ve had so much fun seeing how quickly people click with it.”

Unlike Batman, who’s able to stand his ground and weather the fists of enemies coming at him, staying on the move is more the Squad’s style,





» and everything is built around that. You may need to use traversal abilities to duck out of the way, or to close the gap to take advantage of enemy vulnerabilities. A mix of playstyles is encouraged; melee attacks can juggle enemies and open them up to take even more damage for a period of time with your guns, while your shield can be restored by using melee once you've opened foes up with gunfire. Flanking is important too, especially as Brainiac's forces are armed to the teeth with futuristic tools, laying down glowing shields and the like – so just jet-pack or grapple around them. You're playing as villains, after all; being tricky is the name of the game.

Metropolis is as much a character as the Suicide Squad themselves [I'll try

“ONE OF BRAINIAC'S MOST IMPACTFUL POWERS IS HIS ABILITY TO CHANGE THE LANDSCAPE AND SHIFT THE BATTLEFIELD IN HIS FAVOUR.”

to hold off the cliché police for the rest of the 'graph – ed]. Just as the dark streets of Gotham defined Arkham, Metropolis' brighter boulevards and over-the-top architecture define Suicide Squad – the whole place is a nod in brick, glass, and steel to the superheroic Justice League, now tainted by the ever-watching skull of Brainiac's ship in the sky.

“The whole of Metropolis was built to embody this unique atmosphere: the City Of Tomorrow is a place where giant skyscrapers like [that of] the Daily Planet rise above retrofuturistic monorails and monuments to the Justice League,” says Sadeghian.

1 As villains, you won't have to fight fair, but then your brainwashed opponents aren't going to play nice either. 2 Head-on assaults won't always work. You'll need to make the most of each squad member's mobility options to get the drop on enemies.

“That creates opportunities for the kind of environmental storytelling that we've always loved at Rocksteady, but also to enable truly vertical gameplay.”

And there's some danger to the very bricks and mortar thanks to Brainiac's control over the city's foundations, with the villain sometimes shifting and bending the ground itself to his will. “One of Brainiac's most impactful powers is his ability to change the landscape and shift the battlefield in his favour. I don't want

to spoil too much of what that's about, but the power balance in our game is already heavily weighted in Brainiac's favour – so the squad really have their work cut out for them.”

PAGE TURNER

All of this, from the frantic pace to the bigger, louder brawls, is intended to be in service of properly depicting the Suicide Squad, just as in the Arkham games everything from the gritty, broody visual direction to picking guards off from gargoyles was in service of Batman.

“The foundation for all of our games is about understanding the characters



and their unique personalities, and using that as the core to build our gameplay systems. Through that lens, it's really important to focus on what's unique about our squad and let the gameplay flow naturally from there,” says Sadeghian. “In our game, the Suicide Squad is on an urgent mission to kill these unbeatable heroes, and they could die at any moment. The squad don't have the time to be careful or methodical, and they don't even really like each other, so co-ordinating on any kind of plan is way outside their comfort zones.” The frantic pace doesn't just apply to zipping around chaotic brawls, but to the story as well. “Their best option is to take the fight directly to the Justice League and try not to die. That's such an exciting place for us to explore as designers and storytellers,” Sadeghian enthuses.

Even with that time pressure, the squad members aren't the sort to resist some of Metropolis' temptations. “With a story-driven game like ours, I think it's important to strike a balance that pushes the narrative forward but also gives you the choice to go off and explore other things if you feel like it,” shares Sadeghian. “Alongside the main path, »

INDUCTION DAY

Meet your formerly villainous coworkers as they attempt bomb-encouraged heroic rehab



HARLEY QUINN

With hard-hitting pistols and her trusty baseball bat, Harley sits neatly between being a brawler and dealing damage at range thanks to her acrobatic manoeuvres. With a grappling hook and a bat-drone also in her arsenal, she takes inspiration from the Dark Knight to zip in and out of danger before rejoining the fray from a new angle – sliding under, over, and through foes.



CAPTAIN BOOMERANG

Like a hyperactive child, Captain Boomerang is all about staying on the move, thanks in part to a speed force gauntlet he pilfers early on. Even though he's tapping into the same energy as speedy supe The Flash, he uses it differently, homing in on his trusty boomerang and materialising right in front of enemies to deliver a surprise blast of shotgun shells to the face.



KING SHARK

The only truly superpowered member of the group, King Shark can naturally leap extremely far into the air and use his strength to clamber up almost any surface. That helps him in battle too as the higher they jump, the harder they fall – he deals lots of damage on re-entry. Not to mention he's strong enough to use the heaviest of weapons, such as his minigun and huge cleavers.



DEADSHOT

Unsurprisingly, Deadshot is all about the guns – it's just a question of how close you want to use them. Even his melee attacks aren't strictly melee, as he uses wrist cannons when he gets up close and personal. Able to get the most out of almost any weapon, he can tear things up with an assault rifle before using his jetpack to ascend for the perfect sniping vantage point.



???

...and there are more to come. While the story we've seen centres on the starting four, more squad members will be added for free, with unique suites of abilities. But who? Could we see support characters like Hack or Poison Ivy go full-time? Or perhaps the likes of the gun-toting Peacemaker, ice queen Killer Frost, or martial arts master Bronze Tiger? There are a lot of possibilities.



1

» we've spent time crafting a wide range of side-objectives that can be completed in any order."

These range from side-stories to collectibles, plus opportunities to obtain additional gear and upgrades. "For example, our Support Squad is a group of DC supervillains who have been recruited by Amanda Waller to help the Suicide Squad with their mission. That includes the return of favourites like Penguin and Poison Ivy, as well as characters who are new to the Arkham universe including Gizmo, Hack, and Toyman. They're all there to use their unique talents to help the squad, but also have their own objectives to pursue. You can take on their side-missions to level up their areas of expertise and turn the tide against Brainiac," says Sadeghian. Boosting these uneasy alliances is a classic case of 'You scratch my back, I supe up your huge guns.'

And there's a returning face who Arkham-heads will be especially



1 The pristine walls of Metropolis' gleaming skyscrapers are ripe for some creative 'enhancement'. 2 With his new speed force gauntlet, Captain Boomerang would make a mean postie. 3 Action often feels frantic. The squad are on the back foot, and you can feel it. 4 Big enemies will require some teamwork to take down.

pleased to see. "We also couldn't resist bringing The Riddler back for a new set of challenges that will test our Squad members' minds and bodies," says Sadeghian. So don't expect simply to scoop up trophies – it sounds like you'll need to impress Mr Nigma with your skills.

With heaps of villains and misfits itching to help take down the brainwashed superheroes, it feels like just about everyone who's anyone is here to nudge the narrative along. "It's such a pleasure working with DC to develop our stories and characters. The team over there has been so supportive, going all the way back to Batman: Arkham Asylum," says Sadeghian. "They trust us to write the kind of story that we're inspired to, and will drive our game forward. They're also full of suggestions for



3

how to take our ideas and add a little extra spice, like referencing a long-lost character or dropping a subtle reference to a Silver-Age comic."

GAME OF TOMORROW

With Batman: Arkham Knight having been released in 2015, this followup has been a long time in the making. Originally announced for 2022, it was pushed back to May 2023, and then again to 2 Feb 2024. The most recent delay came after backlash on the web criticised the title's always-online



Juggle foes with melee attacks to leave them vulnerable to taking even more damage from firearms.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE



4

each player to feel like they're part of Suicide Squad and, more broadly, a global Suicide Squad community," says Sadeghian. "This has been at the core of our development and the game has been built from the ground up as an experience that can be shared with friends. We have a variety of social features – rival taunts, the social squad, the friendly competition within the leaderboards – and we wanted to

and character are absolutely central to our process," says Sadeghian.

"Story-wise, this is easily our biggest game, but we're also really keen on being there for players who want to stay with us and continue the adventure. It's really important to us that we're generous with the people who play our game, so for the first year after launch we've got masses of new content that will be completely

"WE WANT EACH PLAYER TO FEEL LIKE THEY'RE PART OF SUICIDE SQUAD AND, MORE BROADLY, A GLOBAL SUICIDE SQUAD COMMUNITY."

make a game where each player is connected to that larger community and where we, as developers, get the opportunity to invite the community to evolve this game together with us."

We can't help but bring up the difficult position many live service-style games have found themselves in recently (for instance, Sega's cancellation of extraction shooter Hyenas, or Bungie's layoff woes with Destiny 2). Sadeghian shrugs off the definition, never referring to Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League as a 'live service' experience. "We don't really think of our game as fitting with any particular label," he shares.

For Rocksteady, Suicide Squad is just the next evolution of its Batman games. "It's still full of the DNA that infuses the Batman: Arkham series – those foundations of story

free for people who own the game," he adds. "That includes new story, missions, locations, gear, costumes, collectable trinkets, and more. What's most exciting is that we're expanding our Squad with brand-new playable characters, each will have their own unique mechanics, and they'll be unlockable for all players for free."

It's certainly true that Squad's scale, from its sprawling city to its huge brawls, is like nothing Rocksteady has taken on before. And unlike the gap between Arkham Knight and this project, the studio has no desire to stop, promising fresh features to overfill Suicide Squad's cup for some time to come. With the launch almost here and Brainiac's heroes ready to tear the world asunder, it'll soon be time to see if Suicide Squad can beat the odds. ■

requirement and live service elements. The former, Sadeghian tells us, will be resolved with an offline story mode that'll be released for free this year. And the delay wasn't due to the latter, he says, but rather to "give us more time to polish the overall experience."

Even so, the online and ongoing aspects aren't non-factors. Rocksteady wants to draw players into something more long-term, and that does mean launching with the game's best shark fin forward. "Our goal is to build a community with this game. We want



Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney Trilogy fills in a big gap in the court record. Kenichi Hashimoto and Janet Hsu take the stand to give Malindy Hetfeld their testimony

Apollo who? If you're a new Ace Attorney fan, you might be wondering just who the star of the upcoming Apollo Justice trilogy is – after all, so far each game in the series proudly bore the title Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney. Phoenix's mentor, Phoenix's best friends – it used to be all about Phoenix. Even the 19th-century-set *The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles* focusses on Phoenix's suspiciously familiar-looking ancestor Ryuichi Naruhodo ('naruhodo', Wright's last name in the original Japanese, means 'right').

But for the fourth game in the main series, *Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney*, the eponymous new defence attorney on the block takes over. Just like when we first met Phoenix, this lush remaster sees us accompanying a rookie through his very first murder trial. It's a setup that makes this a

great opportunity to join the long-lived series even if you haven't previously followed Phoenix's, well, trials and tribulations.

But, as we discover early on in our hands-on, Ace Attorney's developers can't totally abandon their original hero. Within minutes of the first trial, it's Phoenix who finds himself in the defendant's chair. This new era of Ace Attorney presents Phoenix, albeit temporarily, as a changed man – all grown up – while it's Apollo who flounders. But it's on us to prove our former avatar innocent, a turnabout for the books.

IT JUST IS

Still, as fans of the *Like A Dragon* series can attest, getting used to a different protagonist can be difficult. For *Apollo Justice* producer Kenichi Hashimoto, Apollo's fresh-faced naïvete is precisely what makes him such a good character. "He is an interesting counterpoint to his



APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY



It's not all about Apollo: look forward to a new crop of attorneys and prosecutors.



Apollo

This clearly contradicts the witness's testimony!

» mentor, the super-capable 'ace attorney' Phoenix Wright," Hashimoto says.

Despite selling over three million copies of Ace Attorney Trilogy and bringing it to PlayStation for the first time, Capcom put the decision whether to release this second trilogy to a fan vote. The votes poured in – fans' love for the series hasn't abated, even though prior to the first trilogy's rerelease the only modern platform the games were available on was mobile phones.



"We are naturally focussing on longtime fans," Hashimoto tells us. "But I think the trilogy is also appealing to players who perhaps more recently picked up the first Ace Attorney Trilogy collection. And, of course, anyone who has yet to play the games will find this to be a collection packed with great content."

1 When Apollo smells inconsistencies, he's just as quick to shout "Objection!" as Wright. **2** Trucy is a terror. It's great fun to see her add to Apollo's grey hairs.

3 Phoenix's new look and attitude initially take a bit of getting used to. **4** Divination séances show a victim's point of view ahead of death – how convenient.

He deftly summarises Ace Attorney's long-time appeal by calling it a series full of "unique and appealing characters involved in a story full of puzzle-solving" and thinks the series is still essentially the same, because you're an idealistic lawyer determined to get to the truth. But, as is series tradition, getting to the heart of the melodrama can often be a tongue-in-cheek journey, Apollo having to deal with more than his fair share of silliness.

If you thought interrogating a parrot last time around was wild, get ready for the animal kingdom to get involved once again. You'll also go



2

noggin-to-noggin with rival prosecutor and former rock star Klavier Gavin, who shreds air guitar mid-statement, and at one point you'll need to get deep into the intricacies of soba noodles to crack a complex caper. These are some of the liveliest murder trials you'll ever see.

LEGAL EAGLES

Given the leap forward in time and change in leading man, it's no surprise that Apollo Justice's trilogy is

"IF YOU THOUGHT INTERROGATING A PARROT LAST TIME AROUND WAS WILD, GET READY FOR THE ANIMAL KINGDOM TO GET INVOLVED ONCE AGAIN."



APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY



Hold it! We're not done yet

With both trilogies and *The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles* now available in the West, that's all Ace Attorney games covered, right? Hold it! While we wouldn't say no to a remastered port of *Professor Layton Vs Phoenix Wright*, the glaring oversight is the lack of a port of *Ace Attorney: Investigations*.

Investigations, which spawned two games, the second of which hasn't even been translated into English, puts prosecutor Miles Edgeworth front and centre. Don't worry, this is not about spending your time in the courtroom defending criminals. Instead, you move Edgeworth around crime scenes to (you guessed it) investigate crimes, similar to the scene investigations from the main games albeit with added depth and complexity.

In place of interrogations, you have arguments with suspects and your partners in crime investigation alike – old favourites such as Edgeworth's step-sister Franziska von Karma or his long-suffering subordinate Detective Gumshoe. Apart from the obvious advantage of letting you spend more time with Miles Edgeworth, the greatest fictional prosecutor of his time, *Investigations* also introduces you to a host of fresh characters and even Edgeworth's father, who suffered a tragic fate early on in the main series. If Capcom ever asks for porting suggestions again, you know what's getting our vote.

Phoenix

These days, I'm merely Phoenix Wright, piano player.

R1 Court Record History Options Autoplay

filled with new characters in addition to Klavier, though you will spot plenty of returning ones too. The most outstanding new team member is Phoenix's daughter Trucy Wright – she isn't only a talented magician and a master at sleight of hand, she can also sass with the best of them. Trucy seamlessly takes over Maya Fey's job of giving the defence attorney grief for no reason during an investigation. Watching Apollo squirm is a joy (perhaps even more than seeing Phoenix on the hook), his emotive poses just one aspect of a host of detailed expressions among the cast – and there are some truly memorable ones once you 'break' a suspect on the stand.

The fifth game, *Dual Destinies*, meanwhile, introduces Athena Sykes, the first female defence attorney since Mia Fey. Hashimoto calls her his

favourite of the bunch: "She is bright and cheerful in her reactions, but also shows a lot of backbone in terms of her characterisation," he says. While Apollo has a special bracelet that can alert him to lies, Athena introduces a more scientific way of uncovering the truth – thanks to a special gadget, she can read other people's emotions. In the last game in the collection, *Spirit Of Justice*, things take a mystical turn, as you perform not only interrogations but entire divination séances. But even an actual, honest-to-god divination can be cross-examined to find the truth.

While the overall setting and mechanics remain familiar across the new trilogy, the experience of playing the games has improved with each. One big change is the switch from 2D to 3D from *Dual Destinies* onward. While a blog post by Apollo Justice



We'd love the chance to investigate as the swankily dressed Edgeworth at some point.

APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY



1 Using her necklace, Athena can analyse a witness's emotional state and find discrepancies. **2** Phoenix Wright always fights for what he believes in, a common theme throughout the series. **3** Spirit Of Justice introduces the kingdom of Khu'rain, not to be confused with Kurain village. **4** Apollo's main rival, former rock star Klavier Gavin, is actually quite nice and helpful.

» director Takeshi Yamazaki from 2007 suggested the team had experimented with 3D graphics, Hashimoto remembers it differently.

"We had no plans to shift to 3D with Apollo Justice," he says. "During the development of the fifth game, Dual Destinies, we saw how successful the 3D visuals were in Professor Layton Vs Ace Attorney. Combined with the capabilities of the then-current Nintendo 3DS hardware, we felt that we couldn't ignore the 3D possibilities. So we tried out a visual style of 3D models which looked like 2D art, and it turned out even better than we expected."

PLAYING THE ACE

Ace Attorney's localisation was a product of its time that grew its own



"FANS CAN LOOK FORWARD TO A LOT OF NEW NAMES THAT NOD TO WHAT A CHARACTER IS ALL ABOUT, SUCH AS EXPLOSIVES EXPERT TED DONATE."

legs, so to speak – when the first Ace Attorney game was released in the West in 2005/2006, the localisation team made an effort to make the game more 'palatable' to local audiences by changing names, dialects, and even foods, while trying to preserve the game's at-times-bizarre humour as best as possible. Similar to the Like A Dragon series, this grew to be its trademark, to the point the localisation team became involved in development.

Localisation director Janet Hsu recalls that the shift to 3D also meant changes for her team. "As the games' visual language got more and more complex, the scripting for each game got more and more involved as well,"

she says. "Therefore we had to learn the scripting language in order to make the English version feel as natural as the Japanese version with regards to comedic timing and auditory cues. This additional level of detail is what I believe helps give Ace Attorney that extra bit of multisensory fun that is so iconic to the series."

The localisation team became involved in development in other ways. "In the years between Apollo Justice

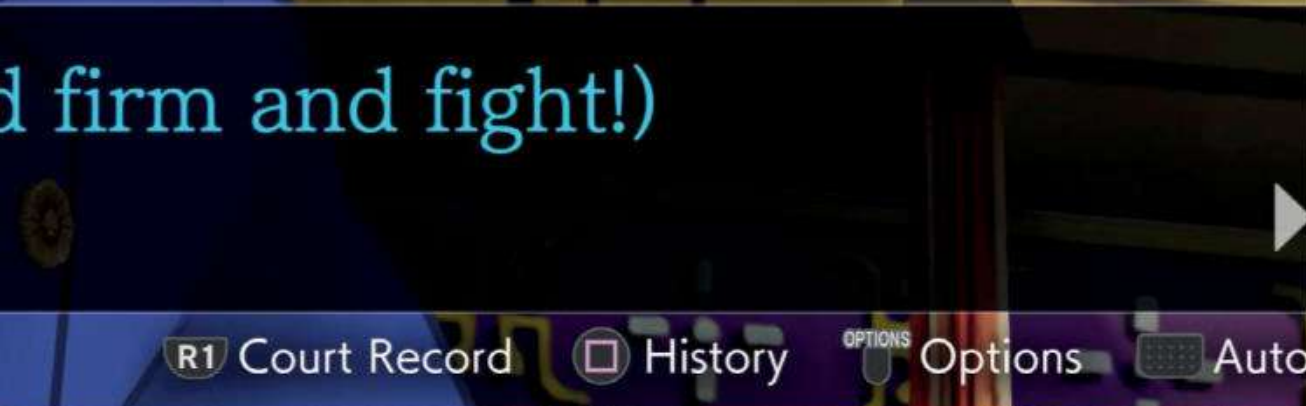
and Dual Destinies, the industry started favouring simultaneous releases. Therefore we had to work together starting much earlier to set up pipelines for a smoother localisation," Hsu says.

"This also led to us running localisation changes by the development team and having deeper discussions about things like character designs and plot points earlier on in the cycle than before. It did also mean that the development team had to juggle more tasks simultaneously."

The result is as enjoyable as always, and fans can look forward to a lot of new character names that



APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY



nod to what a character is all about, such as Guy Eldoon, who's the owner of a ramen stand, or explosives expert Ted Donate.

In addition, this release of the trilogy includes accessibility features that go beyond the hint system introduced in *Dual Destinies*. A story mode toggle completely automates the game, which isn't just for those who want to sit back and watch events unfurl – it'll get you past puzzles you might be stuck on.

Just like the *Ace Attorney* trilogy before it, the *Apollo Justice* trilogy now includes additional translations and voice-overs for every objection. The latter two games here came out at a time when full voice acting for games was already standard, so we asked Hashimoto why *Ace Attorney* never employed it. "The main reason for us not fully voicing the games is because we prefer the flexibility of fine-tuning the script and animations right up to the end of development," he says. "This isn't possible when you have to record every line."

The game also comes with some fun extras, such as a selection of songs from the soundtrack, the additional DLC episodes (which are no longer possible to buy on the hardware they were originally released on), and, crucially, the Animation Studio. If you've ever seen images on the internet of people staging household arguments in the *Ace Attorney* courtroom, Capcom has now given you the power to do the same, by posing character models and writing your own legal drama in-game.

2016's *Spirit Of Justice*, which caps off this trilogy, is the last game in the *Ace Attorney* series to date – and fans are still hoping for a part seven. While no concrete plans exist, Hashimoto feels similarly. "Both of the trilogies of games 1-3 and 4-6 are finished," he says, "But I don't believe the *Ace Attorney* series is." ■

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Years from now, we'll look back on 2023 as one of the best years for new games ever. What's been so interesting to see when talking to our writers and readers is the sheer amount of variety in what everyone wanted to champion. Which means a bigger awards list than ever, and plenty of love to go around. Read on for our bonus awards, the readers' choices, and then finally the critics' rundown of the ultimate top ten of 2023. As if we didn't have big enough backlogs already...

THE CRITICS Jon Bailes, Milford Coppock, Malindy Hetfeld, Luke Kemp, Jess Kinghorn, Miriam McDonald, Chris Schilling, Abbie Stone, Oscar Taylor-Kent, Justin Towell, Rachel Watts, Alan Wen, Dashiell Wood, and... you!



BEST PIRATE GAME THAT ACTUALLY MANAGED TO COME OUT SHADOW GAMBIT: THE CURSED CREW

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** MIMIMI GAMES
DEV MIMIMI GAMES

We were starting to think we had more chance of seeing an actual ghost than of seeing Ubisoft's Skull And Bones on our PS5 (a release date was announced as we worked on this issue). Luckily, this was still an excellent year for videogame piracy, courtesy of this spooky, stealthy treat. Shadow Gambit takes everything that was marvellous about Desperados 3 and makes it even better, thanks to a cast of delightful spirits with some of the best powers we got to play with in 2023. Why settle for a cannon on a ship when one of your crew carries a cannon on their back? And why settle for a regular ship when you can have the Red Marley, with its own soul? This stealth game throws an overwhelming number of guards at you then lets you pick them off with your increasingly OP pirates one by one. Arrrsome.



SLICKEST ACTION NEON WHITE

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE / **DEV** ANGEL MATRIX

Blending genres as it does, Neon White can sound complicated when someone describes it to you. It's a platformer FPS where you have to carefully manage your guns, which are also cards, and can be fired regularly as well as discarded for a secondary effect (such as a super jump). The beauty comes not only in the balletic way these systems *can* come together, but in how easily they *do*. Before you know it you're puzzling out your routes through each bite-size level with absolute precision to cut down your time further and further. Because it feels so good to pull off these swift victories, you'll want to achieve full mastery of every level.

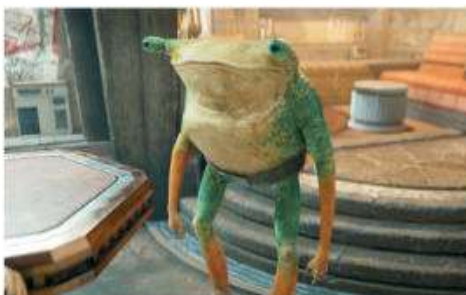


BEST BODY HOPPING TCHIA

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** KEPLER INTERACTIVE / **DEV** AWACEB

Taking inspiration from New Caledonian folklore and culture, this storybook adventure presents an open world you'll want to throw yourself into – literally. Protagonist Tchia is a clever girl with the ability to soul jump, allowing her to possess a variety of creatures and inanimate objects for a short period. Sailing around the archipelago presents a number of delightful opportunities for possession; she can swim among the fish, fly as a bird, or even ignite as a gas canister. Whether you're leaving the scene in explosive fashion or have simply run out of time, the end of each possession sends Tchia hurtling away, making for joyful, bounding traversal.

“SHADOW GAMBIT TAKES EVERYTHING THAT WAS MARVELLOUS ABOUT DESPERADOS 3 AND MAKES IT BETTER, THANKS TO A CAST OF DELIGHTFUL SPIRITS.”



FROGGIEST FRIEND STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEV RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT

This one goes out to all the freaky little guys out there, the ones who never get to be the heroes of their own games but would be a Baleen-class freighter-load of fun to play.

Something of a troublemaker thanks to his chasing of both fame (telling tale tales of his own, often fictional past exploits) and fortune (selling bogus information to the Empire), Turgle's already up to his amphibian eyeballs in trouble by the time Cal Kestis meets him, right after landing on Koboh. He's the kind of pal who will need more than a few helping hands, but he's also always at the bar when you show up, ready to spin some more tales of mischief that you can't pass up hearing.



MOST GRIPPING SYNAPSE

FORMAT PSVR2 / **PUB** NDREAMS
DEV NDREAMS

And we mean this particular award literally. This PSVR2 roguelite shooter isn't afraid to let you go off the rails. You use one of your hands to aim and fire a variety of guns, and the other to pick up and move enemies and objects telekinetically to get up to all sorts of enjoyable mischief.

But that's not all your hands enable you to do. A grip-based cover system allows you to orient yourself on any surface without being fixed to it – but if you use both hands together you can scale the map from all angles, including spider-monkeying up sheer walls or flipping yourself acrobatically off a balcony to avoid an exploding enemy. Few VR games allow you to feel so in control of your action.



BEST PAINTING OUTSIDE THE LINES LABYRINTH OF GALLERIA: THE MOON SOCIETY

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** NIS AMERICA
DEV NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE

We've got to stay tight-lipped about this one's story as it's well worth discovering for yourself. Otherwise, this is the freshest dungeon crawler we've played in years, and we won't shut up about it!

As a spirit bound to a lantern, sent to explore a labyrinth that's deadly to mortals, you'll need every trick in the book to map each floor of the multilayered depths beneath Galleria Manor. Crashing through walls is one of the strangest strings to your bow, but your army of puppet soldiers, with different abilities according to their type, is nothing to sniff at either. Reinforce points are essential to exploration, allowing you not only to turn every level on its head but also to buff up your soldiers, and even totally break the levelling system. We've played little else this year that so gleefully encourages you to smash through its mechanical confines.

GAME OF THE YEAR

DON'T MISS!

FINAL FANTASY XVI



A divisive departure for the series, the first mainline Final Fantasy to go full-on action soars, and it's even better on its New Game+ difficulty. Sure, it might drag in some places, but Clive's fighting styles are as satisfying as Dante's or Bayonetta's, and come the boss showdowns it's absolutely Eikonic.

Alan Wen

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED



Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One introduced a younger

Holmes; Frogwares then remade a 2007 game into this enjoyable sequel, complete with the more youthful version of the detective hero and his best pal Watson. Satisfying puzzles and a good dollop of cosmic horror mean it's no mystery why this is worth your time.

Miriam McDonald



BIGGEST FEELS

A SPACE FOR THE UNBOUND

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB TOGE PRODUCTIONS / DEV MOJIKEN

This was 2023's most human game. It's funny, sad, a little flawed, complex, and utterly unforgettable. The interpretation of 1990s Indonesia provides a stunning sense of place, with everything being grounded by taking place in a town you feel you

could visit. A broad spectrum of emotions is evoked, and then come the final chapters... There's a powerfully realistic depiction of severe depression, and the type of support that somebody going through it needs, that will come as an immediate gut-punch to those who recognise it.

The entire plot is exposed to a tragic light of understanding, leading to a fantastic piece of design weaving play and script together just before the end. A beautiful story, at times desperately sad, yet ultimately hopeful, it's given us one of the best cries we've ever had.



BEST CHORUS LINE

STRAY GODS: THE ROLEPLAYING MUSICAL

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB HUMBLE GAMES DEV SUMMERFALL STUDIOS

Though not every act in this choose-your-own-verse musical is created equal, we can't fault the ambition on show. Caught up in a murder mystery of Greek tragedy proportions, protagonist Grace is accused of killing a god and given one week to clear her name. Her investigation takes the form of sing-offs against other deities, performed by a talented cast. While though it's not all harmonious, there are more than a few refrains we're humming to this day. Don't let this one drift past you.



CHALAMOST

LIES OF P

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB NEOWIZ GAMES DEV ROUND8 STUDIO, NEOWIZ GAMES

Oddly enough, we didn't get a Wonka tie-in game this year where Timothée Chalamet had to violently stop the Oompa Loompas unionising. Luckily, Lies Of P was a perfectly solid Bloodborne clone – beautiful environments, punishing combat – that starred a 'Pinocchio' who looked just like everyone's favourite Hollywood stick insect. Inexplicably, in it you can unlock masks that cover up his face. That's like unlocking a gun in Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 that switches the game off and blows up your PS5.



FRESHEST PERSPECTIVE

VIEWFINDER

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB THUNDERFUL PUBLISHING / DEV SAD OWL STUDIOS

This photography game not only captures reality, but dictates it. Need a bridge? Snap a pic of a bench, lay the image over the environment, and ta-da – the gap is gone! Likewise, a patch of sky will erase obstacles like gates. Presenting a central photography mechanic that's both noodle-tickling and novel, this perspective-shifting platformer is more than a flash in the pan. Building on that core premise level after level, reaching towards more than a few surreal (though no less satisfying) 'a-ha!' moments, this one really clicks.



Even when you're losing, you can't help but appreciate the striking effects on show.

HEAVIEST HITTER

STREET FIGHTER 6

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB CAPCOM / DEV CAPCOM

During a heated bout, when time suddenly stops and the screen is splashed with vivid graffiti, is when you'll really feel the impact of Street Fighter 6 – though hopefully not your opponent's fists – and have just enough time to react with a punishing followup.

Drive abilities (Impact, Parry, and Rush) are as flashy as they are accessible to execute, but readable enough that you can't get complacent. There's drama to every decision of a round, then, and elation when you master the read because when you're fighting another player the battle is one of

minds as much as it is skill. But even without these new mechanics, including the welcome Modern controls (which aren't just for beginners, by the way), Street Fighter 6 hits hard and satisfyingly because it successfully nails the same feel as the game that birthed its genre over three decades ago.

GAME OF THE YEAR



AMNESIA: THE BUNKER



Few games can match the sense of tension that you feel when the generator runs out of fuel in Frictional Games' latest scarefest. As the power dies, you're left exposed to the whims of an invincible stalking monster with very sensitive hearing. Creeping back to safety with only a noisy wind-up torch to light the way is peak survival horror.

Jon Bailes

DISNEY SPEEDSTORM



With a massive focus on loot and an art style that isn't exactly 'classic Disney', you could be forgiven for writing this off early on. But... *Mickey Mouse voice engage* Oh boy! Things quickly click into place. This is a glorious, epic, barmy, spectacular, chaotic racing feast that keeps the rewards coming while absolutely bombarding you with fun. Online is superb and it keeps getting great new content, too.

Justin Towell



BEST KATHUNK

ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB BANDAI NAMCO
DEV FROMSOFTWARE

Nothing this year has made us wince quite like getting absolutely bodied by a rival mech. You can feel the genuine love FromSoftware has for its mechanical designs in every nut and bolt in this long-awaited sequel, and the little whirrs and clanks of the armoured behemoth's hefty movement is where the game absolutely shines. No moment more so than when you take a missile square to the chest and are stopped in your tracks with a gut-dropping kathunk. That's us told.



BEST TITLE-DROP

FINAL FANTASY XVI

FORMAT PS5 / PUB SQUARE ENIX
DEV SQUARE ENIX

The secret sauce of the latest Final Fantasy is how it manages to balance some incredibly earnest and emotional moments with others of over-the-top goofiness, all at a downright charming level of sincerity. At no moment does it combine the two better than at the end, when the series' title appears and Clive delivers the line "The only fantasy here is yours. And you will be its final witness", following up with a luxuriously animated punch to the enemy's face. *And it works.* Other games may mimic the recipe, but this is the one we crave.



BEST SOULSLIKE

WO LONG: FALLEN DYNASTY

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB KOEI TECMO
DEV TEAM NINJA

While there have been some real bangers in this subgenre in 2023, Team Ninja once again takes the crown with the sublime, self-identified masocore spiritual followup to Nioh. While some games in this genre feel tough for the sake of it, in Wo Long the difficulty feels justified, commonplace things like stamina reinvented to ensure nail-biting duels that really do feel like they're won on the sword's edge. While it can make us sweat, few games can deliver fights that feel so exhilarating.



MUCKIEST PUP

EA SPORTS WRC

FORMAT PS5 / PUB ELECTRONIC ARTS / DEV CODEMASTERS

Codemasters' first official WRC game is just like a dog in the woods. It just can't wait to get covered in mud, wagging its tail (all right, it's a cornering technique called the 'Scandinavian flick', but we're going with this metaphor so stick with it), emerging from the trees

looking like some kind of Doctor Who monster. And yes, by Castrol, it wants a biscuit.

As luck would have it, we gave it one of the biggest biscuits we have at review because it's a Very Good Boy. Yes it is! Who's a good boy? You are!

Engine revs with delight

A rally game done right, EA Sports WRC is one of the all-time highs for the genre, with superb vehicle inertia as you scrabble across loose, muddy surfaces, chasing the top step of the podium, always hoping to please your 'benefactor' master. If ever you fancied playing a rally game, this is the one.



Knife versus chainsaw? That's a move only for trained zombie-busters.

BEST PARRY

RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** CAPCOM / **DEV** CAPCOM

Resi fans will be debating the merits of the original 2005 release and this remake to the zombified ends of the Earth. But this remake didn't just refine the original, it added one thing we loved: the parry.

Note we said 'the', and not 'a' – this isn't just slapping on

a mechanic featured in a billion other games, but a genuine game-changer for Resi 4's already action-heavy combat. With a well-timed press of **R2** Leon can use his knife to deflect pitchfork charges and thrown axes, at a cost to its durability, opening foes up to melee strikes in the process.

A well-timed rebuff can open up a whole swathe of shamblers to getting knocked down, and it even makes the original's famous QTE knife fight against Krauser into something that's fully playable within the basic mechanics you've been mastering throughout the game. It's a masterful addition.



DON'T MISS!

ROAD 96: MILE 0



Overlooked by many in a year full of bangers, this is a ball of furious

anarchic energy that struggles to concentrate in the best possible way. You're whipped between genres and emotional tones with little warning, every moment riding a wave of power and protest that gives the experience a unique atmosphere.

Luke Kemp



BEST COOKING SOUNDS

VENBA

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** VISAI GAMES / **DEV** VISAI GAMES

There's been a lot of beautiful-looking food in games this year, but Venba, the story of a Tamil mother trying to navigate immigrant life, proves revolutionary in a specific department. That's right, we're talking about the sizzle of oil in a frying pan and the tock-tock-tock of a knife hitting the cutting board. Venba doesn't just make you want to eat, it has the power to make you want to cook, because of incredibly immersive sound design and a narrative focus on the love (and skill) that goes into making food. We may not always pay attention to sound in games, but here it underscores how good sounds mean good food, and how you are the one making deliciousness happen.



MOST SATISFYING INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

DREDGE

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** TEAM 17 / **DEV** BLACK SALT GAMES

Organising shotguns and herbs in a Resident Evil 4 briefcase is all well and good, but try working with slippery fish. Dredge's fisherperson protagonist has a very small boat, you see, so you have to arrange your catch on deck to maximise each haul, and fish here come in all shapes and sizes. While a mackerel neatly fills two adjacent spaces, for example, cod come bent in an L shape, while sharks have sticky-out fins that make them even more irregular, taking up more space than they're worth if you're not careful. Tessellating marine life alongside your nets and engines becomes strangely absorbing. Just try not to lose track of time, as the waters get treacherous after dark.

LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN



Kiryu is back! He's only had about four new ideas since we last saw him, but since one of those ideas is 'rocket shoes' we'll let him off. A shorter Yakuza that's fun but a little overfamiliar. Still, the side-quest where a ChatGPT clone tells an idiot to jump off a bridge is worth the price of entry alone.

Abbie Stone

GAME OF THE YEAR



FINAL FANTASY XVI

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV SQUARE ENIX



While the series is constantly being reinvented, FFXVI might be the biggest departure from the formula yet, eschewing party-based combat to bring lead character Clive to the fore, his Summon-based special attacks echoing the likes of Devil May Cry V. What's really impressive is how well it all works, combining the epic storytelling of the classics with modern hack-and-slash.



ALAN WAKE 2

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** EPIC GAMES
DEV REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT



The years that have passed since the release of the first Alan Wake don't show in Remedy's approach here. The studio's delivered a stunning genre shift into true survival horror as if it were the easiest thing in the world. Though there's no way it was easy for Remedy; neatly iterating on the first game's flashlight combat and the likes of Resi and Silent Hill, this is a whole new beast.

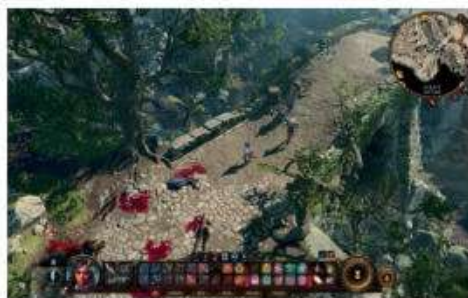


RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** CAPCOM
DEV CAPCOM



Heaps of games have been remade in recent years, and Resident Evil ones in particular, but there's something about this redo of Resi 4 that stands out. Everything you love about the original is here, but it's been reshuffled and nudged around in a way that simply makes sense. This is a stunning second draft that impresses on every possible level, from visual prowess to tense combat.



BALDUR'S GATE 3

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** LARIAN STUDIOS
DEV LARIAN STUDIOS



A dense, number-crunching D&D RPG rising high in a popularity poll? It's something only Baldur's Gate 3 could pull off, thanks to making that complexity easy to intuit for players, yet still revelling in the player expression it enables. Whether it's who to cosy up to at camp or which foe to chuck at who when delivering a smackdown, the decision – and the adventure – is yours.



MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Caught in a web

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** SONY / **DEV** INSOMNIAC GAMES

There's nothing like a true PS5 exclusive to get you buzzing, let alone a first-party one developed by Insomniac Games, which is proving itself to be the master of getting the most out of Sony's wonderful hardware. Peter Parker and Miles Morales have topped your list for good reason – Spider-Man 2 is a huge upgrade to the original in just about every respect.

Not only is New York City significantly bigger than before (it now includes districts beyond Manhattan), it's much lush with greenery, and parts of it even reflect changes due to supervillainy – Sandman's early attack leaves coarse sand *everywhere* [Told you – Anakin]. Kraven's hunters make it a concrete jungle, using stealth tech to turn skyscrapers into secret hunters' blinds. Even web-swinging is better than ever, with more options giving you as much control over the physics as you want, and web-gliding making super-slick chains of movement possible (you can get across the river without breaking a sweat).

But the story is where it really impresses. Fantastic mission design takes our two Spider-Men through unique areas throughout the city as they try to hunt down the hunter, Kraven, who feels genuinely threatening. The symbiote character dynamics are well-delivered too, culminating in an ambitious, goopy climax. One of the best Spider-Man stories ever? You'd best thwipin' believe it.

A full-page background image of Spider-Man in his Iron Man armor, swinging through a fiery, orange-hued environment. The armor is dark grey with glowing yellow and orange lights. Spider-Man is in a dynamic pose, with one leg extended forward and arms outstretched. The background is a mix of bright orange and red, suggesting a fire or explosion.

GAME OF THE YEAR
“EVEN WEB-SWINGING IS BETTER
THAN EVER – YOU CAN CROSS THE
RIVER WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT.”

Both Spider-Men have their own issues to deal with, on top of some challenging villains.

GAME OF THE YEAR



We asked our reviewers to name the best games of 2023 – read on to discover if you might’ve missed a banger!



COCOON
Pondering the orbs

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
DEV GEOMETRIC INTERACTIVE



Like fitting your entire fist inside your mouth, there’s something irresistibly compelling about this puzzler’s levels-within-levels design. You’re cast in the glimmering carapace of a teeny weeny beetle, putting your feelers out for various spherical keys that may in fact be traversable levels themselves! With an organic fleshiness to each world, you won’t be able to resist pulling and prodding at each conundrum.

As you hop between a series of magnificent marbles, you’ll notice there’s a shellac-like sheen to this project – which is perhaps to be expected considering some members of the team also worked on both Limbo and Inside. Unlike either of those more interpretive side-scrollers, this top-down puzzler is a softer touch when it comes to story, allowing its brain-bending mechanics to take centre stage.



BOMB RUSH
CYBERFUNK

All-singing, all-skating, all-city

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB TEAM REPTILE
DEV TEAM REPTILE



In the city of New Amsterdam, resistance is far from futile. As you grind through each borough, making the city your graffiti canvas, the police’s response becomes ever more disproportionate, escalating from truncheon-wielding goon squads to snipers and worse. The odds aren’t in your favour – but that shouldn’t stop you. Grab your skates, board, or bike and hit those rails.

Rollerblading classic Jet Set Radio is a clear influence, with composer Hideki Naganuma even contributing to this game’s soundtrack. BRC also borrows heavily from that earlier game’s stylish wardrobe, but offers slick platforming action that makes its much larger maps a joy to explore and combo through.



GOODBYE
VOLCANO HIGH

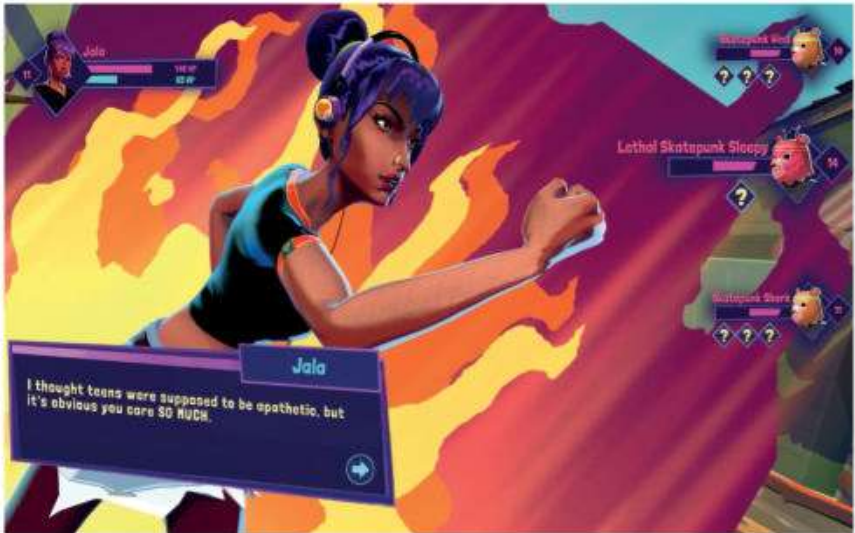
Making an impact

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB KO_OP
DEV KO_OP



Being a teenager going into your final school year is hard enough – but here you are a dinosaur and the asteroid is coming. As Fang, you write songs for your band, play tabletop games with your friends, and prepare as well as you can for whatever comes next. From there, the user interface is cleverly utilised in musical minigames and dialogue choices to heighten the emotion of what will be the senior year to end ‘em all.

This interactive animated series asks, ‘What do we owe each other when soon there will be nothing left?’ One answer it posits is, ‘Before the end, there will be time for music and community.’ For that reason alone, it’s easy to see why it struck a chord for so many in 2023.



THIRSTY SUITORS
Exes gon’ give it to ya

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / PUB ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
DEV OUTERLOOP GAMES



Jala Jayaratne returns home when a bad relationship breakup leaves her with nowhere else to go. Unfortunately, that leaves her surrounded by loves lost and relatives none too happy that this is the first they’re hearing from her in three years. Emotions are undoubtedly high – all anyone needs is a little nudge to go over the edge.

Despite being an RPG mainstay, status ailments are all too easily forgotten in the heat of turn-based battle. Thirsty Suitors reinvents them, fashioning them into another string in its comedy crossbow as well as making them vital to combat. For instance, acrobatically animated taunts can turn an ex-boyfriend into a thirsty mess, leaving them gasping as you dish out damage through targeted special attacks – and the former lover can just as easily use a taunt of their own to clear the air.

“THIRSTY SUITORS REINVENTS STATUS AILMENTS, TURNING THEM INTO ANOTHER STRING IN ITS COMEDY CROSSBOW AND MAKING THEM VITAL TO COMBAT.”



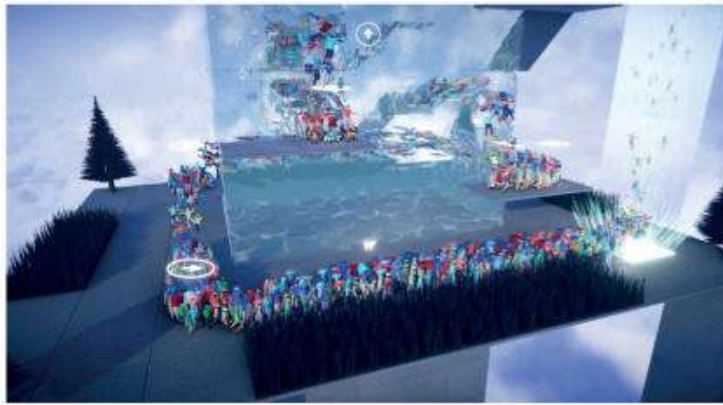
JUSANT

Rising up

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** DON'T NOD / **DEV** DON'T NOD



Many gaming heroes scramble up cliffs – look at Nathan Drake, for one. But many games struggle to make climbing interesting without being too punishing. In Jusant, Don't Nod has got a solid grip on it, making climbing an enigmatic tower in a world where the water went away not only an artistically moving experience, but one that's joyous to play. You control your arms with the left and right triggers, holding them to grip each handhold, while at the same time keeping watch on both your stamina and the amount of climbing rope you have left. At any point on a surface you can slam in a piton to create a checkpoint of sorts. It's a climb you'll relish.



HUMANITY

Tiny happy people

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** ENHANCE GAMES / **DEV** THA LTD



The beauty of Humanity is in how it infuses retro sensibilities into a distinctly modern package. The pointed minimalism harkens back to classic PS1 puzzlers like Kurushi Final, while its sleek design and hordes of tiny people – who you guide to exits as a cute dog – feel like a PS5 tech demo wonderfully woven into an actual game. At its core, the idea is incredibly simple: you dash through tightly designed courses placing tiles to change the crowd's direction and make them do extra actions like jumping. Naturally, it gets more complicated as special collectibles that must be escorted safely to the exit are added, and puzzles get more demanding. It's addictive stuff.



ATELIER MARIE REMAKE



A cute diorama-like graphical overhaul helps this cutesy RPG shine. This very first Atelier game might have stripped-back gathering zones and a calendar system, but it feels fresh to revisit, the simpler design allowing everything to feel more focussed than the more sweeping recent entries. It's well worth a go, and is a great introduction to this warm alchemy-'em-up series.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

DORDOGNE



The past can be impressionistic. As protagonist Mimi's journey helps her recall lost childhood memories, you're immersed in a gorgeous world rendered in watercolours. Journaling mechanics document the summer Mimi went hunting for a dragon, featuring satisfying poetry-crafting mechanics, but overall it feels a touch bare-bones compared to, say, Season: A Letter To the Future. However, the emotional current ebbing through this tale has stayed with me throughout 2023.

Jess Kinghorn



To paraphrase beardy band ZZ Top: he's got legs, and he knows how to use them.

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

The biggest apple

FORMAT PS5 / **PUB** SONY / **DEV** INSOMNIAC GAMES



Thought we were done praising Spidey when it topped the Readers' Choice list? Think again. Few games could follow the hype of being the PS5 exclusive of the year with actually delivering on that. Insomniac's prowess at developing for PS5 is a factor, stunning visuals bringing New

York to life and every comic-book thwack packing impact. Playful use of improv actors further makes the city feel lived in, with heaps of NPCs having delightful conversations (eat that, AI).

It runs like a dream across performance and fidelity modes, the latter working with 120Hz TV input via HDMI 2.1 to run at a whopping 40fps – and those ten

extra frames do make a difference. They're visuals you can play with as well thanks to a terrific photo mode.

Superhero scraps feel more sprawling thanks to greater enemy variety that makes effective use of space (Kraven's goons can now perch, allowing snipers to get shots off), and even MJ gets to shine with some good aggressive stealth gameplay. Spectacular, natch.

GAME OF THE YEAR



GHOST TRICK: PHANTOM DETECTIVE

Beyond the grave

FORMAT PS4 / PUB CAPCOM / DEV CAPCOM

Given you were there, you'd think solving your own murder as a ghost would be a non-problem. That's not the case here, as you've lost your memory not only of the fatal incident, but of many of the innate skills of a human – like being able to read or walk. You can only move by possessing the spirit cores of objects around you and using 'ghost tricks' to poltergeist them into action, such as knocking over a broom or spinning bike wheels.

As this is from Ace Attorney creator Shu Takumi, what sounds simple quickly becomes more complex, your killing in a scrapyard spiralling out into a weaving puzzle box of intrigue that takes place over one long night. You'll need to deal with more deaths along the way too, as one of your tricks allows you

to return to four minutes before another's death, averting their fate as you nudge destiny in a more favourable direction and make allies in the process.

Which means the bulk of the game is really about reading through a good-humoured mystery and solving intricate puzzle rooms. Excellent animation and superb character designs make watching these deadly incidents a joy, even though you know many of the characters are bumbling their way to slapstick deaths – one has you trying to save someone from being crushed by a restaurant's massive statue of a roast chicken. Simple mechanics are elegantly built upon to constantly push you a little further, and everything wraps up with solutions that are a pleasure to behold, and a story you'll remember for the rest of your life.



Astarion himself is a chart topper – the vampire has charmed gamers worldwide.



BALDUR'S GATE 3

Taking initiative and rolling critical success

FORMAT PS5 / PUB LARIAN STUDIOS
DEV LARIAN STUDIOS

We could fill many tomes banging on about the things we love about Larian's latest expansive RPG: the music; the gorgeous rendition of multiple Dungeons & Dragons locales; and turn-based combat that borrows heavily from immersive sims with often-explosive results. What we would like to highlight first instead is our personally prodigious love life and the journey it leads us on across the Sword Coast.

Okay, yes, mindflayers have set their sights on Faerûn, implanting illithid tadpoles in many unwilling hosts, and that's all dire but have you heard about an elf called Astarion? All joking aside, Baldur's Gate 3 expertly balances world-altering high-fantasy stakes with beautifully realised character writing. After all, what good is saving the world if you don't care about any of the people in it?

The efforts of Larian's fleet of writers, coupled with the heartfelt performances of a small army of motion capture actors, ensure that you not only care about your questing comrades, but that you do so *deeply* (though it's worth noting hatred too can be classed as an intense kind of 'caring'). Hate them or, more likely, love them, this adventuring party goes down in history as a bunch of weirdos we're looking forward to journeying with again and again. We don't know about you, but we've already rolled up character sheets for at least two more playthroughs of this 100-plus-hour RPG – and doesn't that just say it all? In addition to Origin protagonist playthroughs bringing you closer to that core cast, the Dark Urge offers a bloody remix of familiar plot beats for future playthroughs. There's only one thing left to say: roll initiative.

"EXPERTLY BALANCES WORLD-ALTERING HIGH-FANTASY STAKES WITH BEAUTIFULLY REALISED CHARACTERS."

GAME OF THE YEAR



ALAN WAKE 2
The return

FORMAT PS5 / PUB EPIC GAMES / DEV REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT

Following two protagonists with many overlapping red threads between them, this thriller keeps you guessing through every twist of its unspooling mystery. Returning to the town of

Bright Falls in the wake of a ritualistic killing, few aspects of the story that unravels from there are straightforward. Each question mark points the way deeper down the spiral, and you know what? We love it all the more for it. Boasting

intrigue, a mixed media reality with decidedly blurry edges, and a catchy musical detour we've yet to stop humming, it's not hard to see why Remedy's latest is the critics' favourite for 2023. Here are just five reasons why we love this page-turner.

01

THE PLOT THICKENS

As it's a survival horror third-person shooter at heart, you may think you already know this story. But in addition to punchy, Resi-style shooting and inventory management, Alan Wake 2 has a few bright ideas of its own, the titular writer's Dark Place plot board among them. As Alan explores a nightmarish New York torn from the pages of his own hardboiled detective novels, he finds inspiration. Ideas strike in the dark, and take their places on Post-its you can then move from scene to scene in the loneliest writer's room. On top of telling tales that echo Bright Falls' murder mystery, fresh ideas warp the environment around you, opening new paths and even giving you resources like batteries. You get drawn into the creative process, and it's hard to ignore what the plot board says about the writer himself, or the sense that perhaps Alan is his own worst enemy...

02

DOING IT
LIVE-(ACTION)

Live-action footage is key ammunition in Remedy's vibes-based arsenal. Whether it's clips of live actors cutting in as jump scares, or shadowy 'echoes' overlaying the Dark Place as Alan delves deeper into things, it's all essential to creating a reality with decidedly blurry edges. But Remedy doesn't only use live-action footage (or 'blended video') to evoke a strong sense of mystery and dread, it also has fun with it. Live action is, in fact, essential to the goofy humour throughout. As Saga investigates Bright Falls and the nearby small town community of Watery, two major players come into view. The Koskela brothers, Ilmo and Jaako, are local businessmen who have apparently tried their hand at promoting everything: beer; tourism; ill-advised coffee-themed activity parks for children. Each of Saga's chapters features a TV spot promoting yet another questionable Koskela venture, always employing delightfully homemade props, off-kilter performances, and at least one banger of a line that echoes around PLAY Towers to this day (usually because our games editor has blurted it out at full volume again).

05

WE SING

We couldn't *not* mention it: Alan's all-singing detour deeper into the Dark Place. Old Gods Of Asgard return for a bite-size rock musical, and Alan himself takes the lead.



Early verses recount Alan's origin story, a tale of childhood nightmares chased away by passed-down stories and the magic clicker. Footage of the band delivers a banger of a chorus.



Oh, you thought this was going to be a leisurely stroll set to guitar shredding? Nope, there's the art deco lamp, and there's your torch – it's back to puzzling your way out.



no We guarantee you'll JAVA great time.



Appropriately for a game about light versus darkness, every environment is brought to life by technically impressive lighting that makes the most of PS5's power in both quality and performance modes. It's

just one aspect of the strong visual direction. On paper, hanging out in a clearly cursed cinema to watch an arthouse film entirely in Finnish seems an unlikely option in a survival horror shooter –

much less something you'd see yourself actually planting your in-game feet for. But in practice, Yötön Yö (or 'Nightless Night') is just one of many occasions when Alan Wake 2 encourages you to stop

and smell the horrifying roses. The woods surrounding Cauldron Lake – heavily researched and well realised right down to each individual frond – are another, even as the Taken take their best shot at you.



The game may be called Alan Wake 2, but Saga Anderson is a great joint lead.



Following the introduction of the much-missed flare gun, the Taken takes over the stage. Accompanied by the sickest guitar solo you've yet heard, it's time to have a blast.



All right, that was intense – time for some smooth jazz. The plot board proves pivotal once again, drafting a closing verse to bring this song to its end.

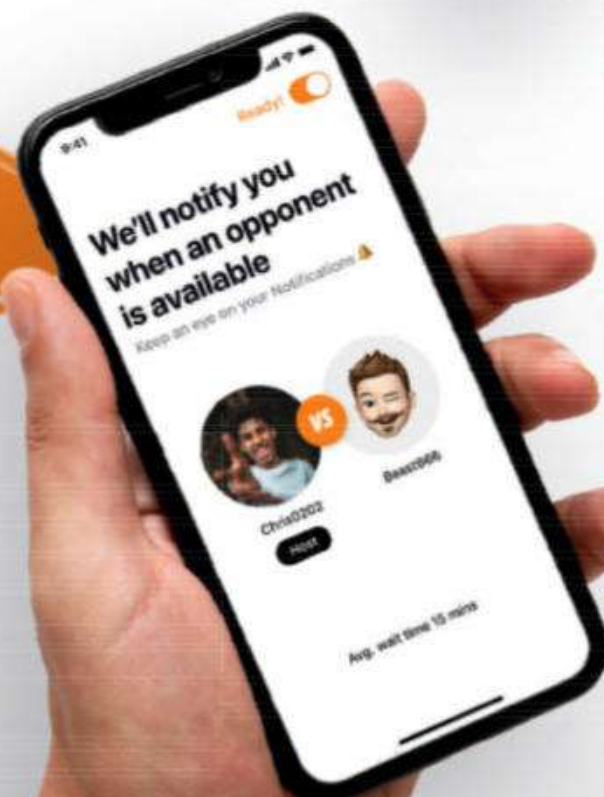




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Reviews



"IT'S A GAME OF
POKES FOR
ADVANTAGE."

076 GBVS: Rising

070 Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora

Will what's inside the box leave us feeling blue?

HIGHLIGHTS

AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA 070 | ARIZONA SUNSHINE 2 074 | GRANBLUE FANTASY VERSUS: RISING 076
FINAL FANTASY XVI: ECHOES OF THE FALLEN 077 | TEARDOWN 078 | WARHAMMER AGE OF SIGMAR: REALMS
OF RUIN 080 | CHANTS OF SENNAAR 081

Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora

Yet a Na'vi Ubisoft game obsessed with levelling and crafting



INFO

FORMAT PS5

PRICE £69.99

ETA Out now

PUB Ubisoft

DEV Massive Entertainment

PLAYERS 1-2
(co-op online only)

LENGTH 20-25 hrs
(campaign)

ACCESSIBILITY
Adjustable – combat difficulty, navigation guidance, adaptive trigger strength, vibration strength inc individual elements, volume inc individual elements, and cursor speed; customisable – UI, FOV, controls, control sensitivity; on/off – aim assist, hacking auto lock-on, hacking autocomplete, Memory Painting autocomplete, autosave, motion blur, night mode, controller speaker, menu narration, tinnitus effect, 'important sounds' audio; gathering difficulty low/off; right/left-handed controls; invert horizontal or vertical looks; colourblind modes; subtitles on/off

Good news: this game is similar to the movies in some significant ways. Bad news: this game is similar to the movies in some significant ways. The problem isn't necessarily that it looks better than it plays; more that it struggles to decide whether it's an Avatar game or an Ubisoft game, as it seems the two are rather different.

Frontiers Of Pandora pulls off a neat trick with the premise. Set between the two films released thus far, with events taking place in a previously unseen area of the Na'vi homeworld Pandora, it creates a situation allowing for both adherence to the source material and creative freedom. It largely succeeds on both fronts (to the point where anybody who hasn't watched the first film might occasionally find themselves a little confused).

If you're wondering whether FOP looks as good in motion as it does in screenshots, the answer is 'hell yeah', especially using performance mode. This is easily one of the best-looking PS5 games on the market, helped in no small part by the painstaking recreation of the art style of the films. This is recognisably Pandora, and it is *gorgeous*.

OPANDORA WORLD

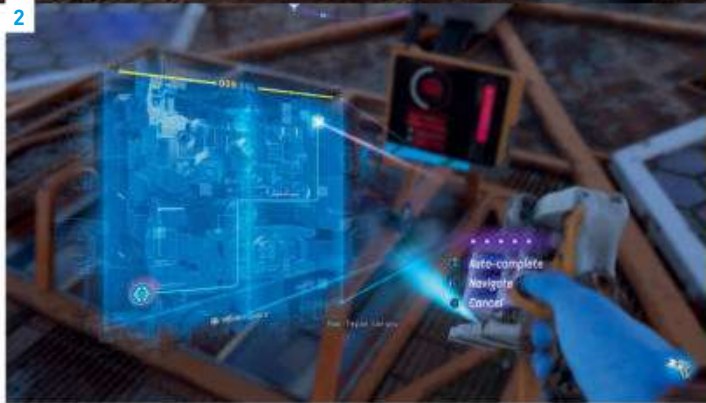
Scratch beneath that incredible surface, however, and issues start to appear. As you might expect, this is a story-heavy game, with many cutscenes (which you can skip if you wish) and characters regularly chatting over the radio, in person, or – in your case – to themselves. How strange and disappointing, then, that the writing is so weak. Take the game's main baddie, John Mercer. You hardly ever see him, and whenever you do, you're reminded that he's written with all the depth of a breakfast cereal mascot. Every line out of his mouth is vapidly, transparently evil. We're only surprised they didn't give him a handlebar moustache to twiddle and some train tracks to tie a helpless Na'vi to.



The combat is one of the game's more satisfying elements, and taking down one of these large lads always feels good.



■ You really do feel like you're on Pandora, which is a true joy to explore. ■



- 1 Even areas devastated by pollution are visually impressive, with rich, dark browns and multifaceted greys.
- 2 There's lots of hacking in this game. Too much, really – especially for a Na'vi protagonist.
- 3 We usually avoid using the human weapons, which aren't nearly as interesting to wield as the Na'vi ones.

More generally, the story, like much of the game, feels directionless. Too much of it is vague 'humans do bad stuff to peaceful aliens', and the handling of the environmental and colonial themes means they simply don't have the teeth they need to be effective. The game ends with you trying to stop Mercer doing A Very Bad Thing, but it's not made clear *why* he wants to do it.

There's still plenty to enjoy, especially for fans of the movies. You really do feel like you're on Pandora, which is, despite a questionable level and quality of things to do, a joy to explore. This is especially true when, after four to six hours, you get your ikran (the pterodactyl-like creatures Na'vi fly upon). Trying to get the look and feel of the beast must have been incredibly difficult, but the developers nailed it. Simple and fun to control, it's a joy whose use is wisely limited only occasionally during the outside portions of the story.

TURF AND SMURF

Play is largely split between traversing the environment to reach a certain point (sometimes made difficult by the game's frustrating refusal to

indicate a clear path) and combat. There's a lot of satisfaction to be had from these scraps. The mech suits that enemies often use are intimidating, especially when encountered in groups (which they usually are). Taking down a pilot with a single well-placed arrow or temporarily disabling the suit so you can get in close for a takedown before running to a hiding spot captures the David-and-Goliath spirit of the movies perfectly.

The bottom line, though, is that this has every appearance of a game where developers and executives wrestled for control over the design at every step of development. The men in suits must have been salivating so powerfully at the prospect of a great excuse for crafting – the forest-dwelling, nature-loving Na'vi – that they drenched their neatly ironed ties. Thus, you need to gather materials from the world to craft food. To craft weapons. To craft ammo. To craft clothing. *Sigh*.

That fits with the concept of the Na'vi, sure, yet somebody just couldn't resist dumping in an awful lot of hacking electrical equipment alongside it. Your ability to do this (as well as your strong American accent) is vaguely explained away by your having been stolen from your clan at a young age, and then raised by the occupying human forces for many years. This is also used as an excuse to crowbar in the entirely unnecessary ability to use assault rifles, shotguns, and even rocket launchers. The game would have been much better without all this.

CAMERON EILEEN

What is antithetical to the concept of the Na'vi is the industry's tiresome obsession with levelling, and tying that levelling to gear. Why would a spiritual society place so much importance on material objects? Remember that bit in the first film when the Na'vi spent 20 minutes gathering materials so

Has every appearance of a game where developers and executives wrestled for control.



4 Unlock the mech takedown ability as soon as you can – we rely on it often. **5** The spear thrower is powerful, but slow to launch. Plan carefully, especially against fast movers. **6** Ikran flight is one of the best aspects of FOP.



that they could make Superior level hats that raised them two levels above the RDA soldiers? No, us neither.

It's not a *bad* game, just a disappointing one. Had this been a straightforward action-adventure, it might have been something special. Instead, we have constant roadblocks to progress thrown in by a company terrified of criticism from people who irritatingly equate length with quality. Missions that take place kilometres apart. Jumps in enemy levels. Hacking that is slow even if you take advantage of the option to skip the minigame. Abilities and upgrades locked away in skill trees or scattered across the huge map.

While we'd rather the crafting element had been left out,

finding specific materials to gather or animals to hunt has been made painless. Dive into the menus and you'll find an easily navigable list of flora and fauna telling you where they can be found. You can also pin a few targets so that their highlights are differentiated from others when seen via your Na'vi senses.

Even the obligatory base takeovers are handled well to an extent, in that completing them usually relies on flipping switches or sabotaging electronics rather than killing every last soldier, though it's annoying that the whole base usually knows where you are if one person spots you.

Despite the flaws, we enjoy our time in Pandora. We just can't shake the feeling that we should be enjoying it a lot *more*.



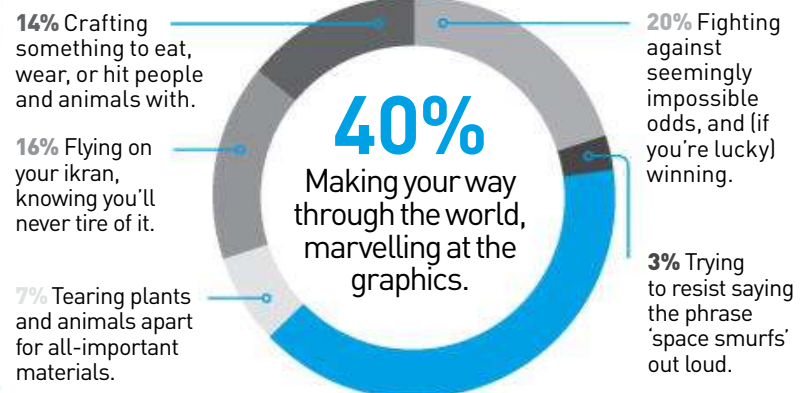
Visually stunning, this is a fun but undeniably flawed visit to the superbly recreated world of Pandora. It should have been better; we're left feeling blue about that. **Luke Kemp**

6

PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: AVATAR: FOP



HOW TO... UNLOCK ANCESTOR SKILLS



Ancestor Skills are instantly unlocked abilities. Open up your map, look for any pink columns of light, and place a custom waypoint. Once there, look carefully for small blue fairy lights in the air that indicate you're close. Follow that path, and you'll soon find the Tarsyu flower.

STATPACK

13

Years between the first and second Avatar movie release dates. Sony released two consoles in that time; the last Avatar game was on PS3!

05

Types of Na'vi weapon to find, craft, and mod: Heavy bow, longbow, shortbow, spear launcher, and staff sling. The latter can be used to set traps.

02

Pieces of paid story DLC confirmed, one of which introduces a new region to the map. Despite our criticisms of the main game, we're intrigued.

LOVING/HATING



TOP FRONTIER

Everything looks utterly incredible. We never get tired of seeing what's round the next lovingly crafted corner.



BLUE HOO

Game publishers, we are begging you! Please. Stop. Putting. Loot. Mechanics. Into every single full-price game!

TROPHY CABINET



BRONZE

Unlock three skills in each branch of the skill tree. It's useful to diversify.



SILVER

Collect 30 audio logs for this. Yes, there are audio logs, because of course there are.



GOLD

Complete a skill tree branch, then meet one final challenge and unlock an Apex Skill.

Melee weapons are powerful but not very durable, and unlike guns they'll drop to the ground if you lose your grip on them.



Arizona Sunshine 2

The zombie apocalypse isn't so bad when you have a Buddy

What makes life worth living during a zombie apocalypse? For our nameless lone survivor protagonist in VR sequel *Arizona Sunshine 2* it's having someone to tell your dumb jokes to. That someone turns out to be a dog, who your dude decides to call Buddy. While good boys have been practically memed to death, we haven't connected emotionally with a virtual animal like this since Trico.

It's what largely elevates an otherwise straightforward but entertaining shooter as you criss-cross through the state of Arizona on the search for Patient Zero, who might hold the solution to curing humanity of the plague that's causing zombification. At the same time you're also trying to survive in the face of hordes of undead – or 'Freddies', the name our protagonist indiscriminately gives them. That was also the case in its predecessor, while your protagonist is once again voiced by Sky Soleil, making boozy, swearsy quips in a Southern drawl but also acting with genuine pathos when interacting with Buddy.

Your canine pal isn't just for petting and playing catch with. You can command him to retrieve items in areas that are out of your reach, and to move corpses out of the way from doors you're trying to open. Of course, there's a high chance that any inanimate-looking Fred will rise up to



INFO

FORMAT PSVR2
PRICE £39.99
ETA Out now
PUB Vertigo Games
DEV Vertigo Games
PLAYERS 1-4
LENGTH 6 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Difficulty settings; playable seated or standing; sliding comfort mode; customisable movement inc sliding or teleporting; continuous or snap turning; 180-degree rotation; skippable climbing



take a bite out of you, but you can get Buddy to sic them – every little helps when you're facing multiple undead shuffling towards you.

RIGHT DEAD FRED

Naturally you're more than equipped to take care of Freddies yourself. Blowing their heads off with one of the many guns available is fine, though it's more satisfyingly gruesome to drive a melee weapon like a machete into their skulls, then rip it out by pulling the controller back.

Weapon management can require shrewdness, as you can only fit two short weapons, such as pistols and uzis, in your belt holsters and one long weapon, such as a gun, on your back. You

can also store an item such as health-restoring food, a crafted explosive, or a melee weapon, on each of your wrists (it's weird, we know, but it works). Do you want to take the next fancy gun you come across when you know you have plenty of ammo for another gun you already own? On one occasion we find ourselves unable to use ammo we've got at maximum capacity because we ditched the weapon that uses it several chapters previously and haven't come across it again since.

NAUGHTY DOG

However, when the hordes ramp up (and boy can they escalate rapidly), your limitations become more pronounced. The diegetic UI means you rarely

There's a high chance that any inanimate-looking Fred will rise up to take a bite out of you.



1 An ambush waiting to happen. Blow a Freddie's head off while it's down, to be safe. **2** Open areas are ripe for exploration but threats can come from all sides. At least Buddy's with you. **3** It's game over when the screen turns red.

know you're completely out of ammo until you pull the trigger and hear the awkward sound of an empty clip.

Conversely, while the ridiculous amount of ammunition strapped to your chest does have numbers displayed, there's not realistically enough space to show every type for the dozens of available weapons, so some only appear when you reach to reload, while at other times you're relying on your protagonist's vocal cues to know if you're running low.

We also experience technical issues where our hand fails to detect one of our holstered weapons or we run into invisible barriers between environments that make it hard to reach for items unless we physically lean

or step forwards, though this is far from the only VR title to have this shortcoming.

Hopefully these are frustrations that can be fixed with updates, as the campaign is otherwise well worth a play, a fun and well-paced adventure featuring a decent variety of environments, from an abandoned motel to sewers, canyons, and even a sequence on a train reminiscent of that in *Uncharted 2*. There are certainly a few knowing winks to Naughty Dog – even a melancholic pluck of guitar strings that lightly pastiches *The Last Of Us*. But despite an obviously schlockier tone, we're not completely exaggerating when we say you might find yourself having a stronger bond with Buddy than Joel did with Ellie.

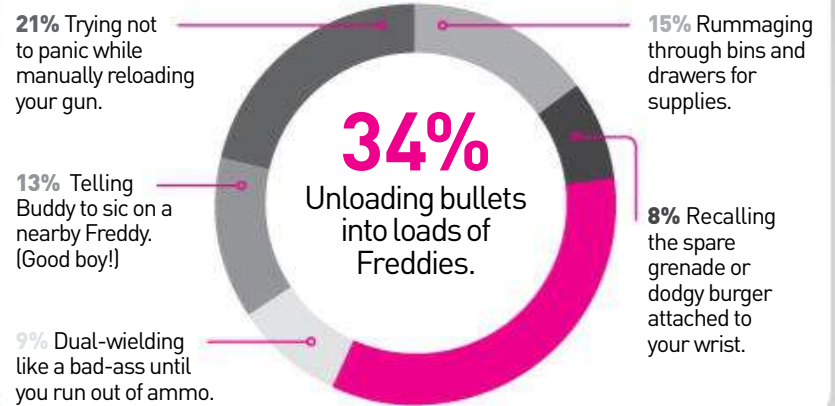


A larger, varied zombie shooter sequel with an emotionally resonant story about a man and his dog, but equipment frustrations mean it's short of VR greatness. Alan Wen



THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: ARIZONA SUNSHINE 2



HOW TO... CRAFT EXPLOSIVES



Scavenged junk can be used to craft explosives when you find a crafting box. Open it, then select a card for a mine, stick grenade, molotov, or pin grenade. The relevant ingredients will pop up for you to pick up and smooch together. Make sure you've got space on your wrists for them.

LOVING/HATING



BUDDY BOY

The best dog-petting mechanics ever, not just because you're physically petting but because Buddy's fur moves accordingly.



GUN SHUFFLE

Manually reloading is satisfying in VR but fiddly to do when facing a zombie horde – not the best time for hand tracking issues to occur.

MULTIPLAYER



The campaign is playable in co-op, even if that breaks the narrative of a lone survivor and his dog. Horde mode, meanwhile, enables up to four players (it's also playable solo) to try to survive waves of Freddie's, though there's just one level at launch and the guns are very limited.

IS IT BETTER THAN?



NO

Synapse, a roguelite FPS set inside the mind of a mad colonel is mechanically more satisfying.



YES

A larger campaign, more weapons, better controls, and Buddy all mean AS2 is better than the first AS.



YES

Supermassive's VR haunted ghost ride, Switchback VR, disappoints on every level. No competition.



New fighter Anila is great for new players — no need to feel sheepish about using her!

Granblue Fantasy Versus: Rising

All aboard for a second voyage



INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £39.99
ETA Out now
PUB Cygames
DEV Cygames, Arc System Works
PLAYERS Multi
LENGTH 8-10 hrs (story) / unlimited (online)
ACCESSIBILITY Good tutorials; no down side to using simple inputs

Tipping its sky captain's tricorn to fighting game tradition, this followup to the 2020 fighter Granblue Fantasy: Versus (which our prior incarnation gave 9/10) isn't quite a full sequel but is more than a basic upgrade. The anime-style story is longer, the fights more explosive, and online has better netcode.

Developed by Arc System Works (which is also behind Guilty Gear and Dragon Ball FighterZ), this translation of the mobile RPG to fighter looks gorgeous in motion, while dishing out moves feels tight and responsive, and it oozes character. Fans of the source material will love the banter and nods to prior adventures, and while newcomers may feel like they've been thrown into the deep end of the lore pool, it's hard to resist diving in.

SHIP SHAPE

For the most part, the fundamentals are the same as in the non-Rising variant; each fighter has a light, medium, and heavy attack, plus a unique action to weave into combos. Each of a character's four special move skills can be used with hadouken-style quarter-circles and the like, but the game defaults to telling you first that you can use them with **RB** and a D-pad input.

Skills can be modified with a mid or heavy input to adjust the move's function (and these require a

longer cooldown). Mimicking the mobile RPG, these are visible right below the health bar and mostly don't use any meter, meaning it's a game of pokes for advantage before you use one of your available skills.

It's simple, but compelling — and the decision to remove the base game's cooldown advantage on the more technical input levels the playing field and makes clear that deciding what moves to dish out is the point here. A revised auto-combo system on **△** adds to this.

Further complexity to your options expands things. Now you can spend 50% of your special meter to power up some of these skills, use dash attacks (and a dedicated dash button), and spend limited bravery

points to both guard break and burst your way out of a beatdown (which you can then combo off of). While some pros may dislike this lowering of the floor, these smart additions at least play into that new focus.

Beyond tweaks to mechanics, rollback netcode comes to online along with a lobby packed with minigames. There's also a new chapter to the story, though the ending feels incomplete, leaving us awaiting updates, and the returning content has had a lot of its brawler sections stripped out beyond key boss fights (what was 'RPG mode' is now simply 'story mode'). And we get four new fighters. Could this have been an update? Maybe, but it's a voyage worth fighting over anyway.



While we're sad to see RPG mode go, the fighting in this update-sequel is wonderfully easy to get to grips with and dripping with possibilities. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8

PLAY

The Sagespire is an impressive ruin – and a challenging, boss-rich dungeon.



Final Fantasy XVI: Echoes Of The Fallen

Omega has the final word



INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £7.99 (or £19.99 for the Expansion Pass)
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Creative Business Unit III
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 2-3 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable subtitles; story mode; visualisation toggle for in-game sounds; customisable camera (inc sensitivity and targeting assists)

Finished last year's epic, combat-heavy revitalisation of Final Fantasy and want more? Then load up your endgame save and get ready for an adventure that takes place right before the final mission – though it doesn't add much more than that.

With that said, it's still great to see a full party of our heroes set out on one more quest all together before the narrative's inevitable conclusion, especially as the base game only rarely allows you to rock around with a four-person squad (including your dog, of course). Unfortunately Echoes doesn't really capitalise on the group dynamic all that much, Clive's companions more or less dropping the odd comment to him rather than feeling integral to the action. Despite the two- to three-hour runtime it all feels quite slight, essentially being one dungeon with some running around before you get to it.

SAGE ADVICE

When new crystals of an unusually poor quality start circulating on the market, Clive becomes concerned that they may be from a mothercrystal nobody knew about. Tracking down the source involves finally going through the mysterious DLC door just to the north of Eastpool, taking you to the Sagespire. These ruins of the Ancients are

similar to some others you've explored but filled with more mechanical elements, including test tubes that house twists on monsters you've already faced.

Otherwise it's a fairly standard tower-ascension dungeon, though it does boast impressive views and several tough boss encounters that are fun to overcome. Some design and musical motifs nod to Final Fantasy XIV, and one mini-boss even does so mechanically thanks to a spinning roulette of spikes that forces you to reposition into safe zones just like in the MMORPG.

The final boss, Omega, takes it all to another level. This multi-phase behemoth throws just about everything you can imagine your way, from huge

slashes to rocket-boosted tackles and swathes of bullet hell orbs to lasers. There's even a constricting arena towards the end (aided by music that intensifies gloriously as each phase progresses).

While it's definitely interesting to get a further glimpse into FFXVI's enigmatic Ancients, Echoes definitely feels like a side-story rather than anything that really changes how you feel about the main ending. The first of two DLC releases, this is the cheaper and shorter one – the next features a new region, Eikon (Leviathan), and suite of combat skills. For now, this'll tide fans over, but aside from a rollicking boss fight the rest of it feels non-essential. Bring on the sea beast.



A new dungeon with some trimmings, only the new boss fight truly impresses. The rest offers some fine though non-essential worldbuilding. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**



Too tall, eh? We'll soon fix that! Shame about the digger, but it's not ours.

5.2 METERS TOO TALL

VEHICLE CONDITION

Teardown

Our performance brings the house down every night

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women in it merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, which they usually make themselves with the help of firearms and explosives. So said William Shakespeare, and who could have guessed that the Bard's precise wording would be so relevant to a heist-planning videogame released hundreds of years later? But that's genius for you, we guess.

Anyway, enough about him, and more about your life of crime. The campaign is peppered with neat surprises, but generally speaking, a typical mission will task you with destroying or stealing a bunch of stuff (with optional targets that you can hit for extra points). Each map is made up of voxels, and almost everything is destructible, so you can get from A to C by smashing a hole through B and leaving little bits of it everywhere.

Things are, of course, not quite that simple.

You start off with a sledgehammer, which is great for breaking through glass and wood, but not much else. You unlock more tools as you go along (going after those optional targets speeds this up a little), and before long you'll be using a blowtorch to get through metal fences and a shotgun to get through almost everything, with plenty more to look forward to. As in real life, however, you need to be wary of alarms, which can spoil your fun.



INFO

FORMAT PS5

PRICE £24.99

ETA Out now

PUB Saber Interactive

DEV Tuxedo Labs

PLAYERS 1

LENGTH 15 hrs (main story)

ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable FOV, music volume, sound volume, control sensitivity and stick dead zones; depth of field, motion blur, barrel distortion, vibration, trigger effect, mission skipping and spawn menu on/off; performance or fidelity mode; adjustable health, ammo, and alarm time; customisable controller layout

The alarms are the fulcrum on which the fun of the campaign spins. A common mission setup is that the items you're tasked with stealing are spread across the map, and taking just one of them sets off an alarm. When that happens, you have 60 seconds to nab all of the remaining targets and make it to your escape vehicle. Stealing is easy; it's the getting away part that's hard.

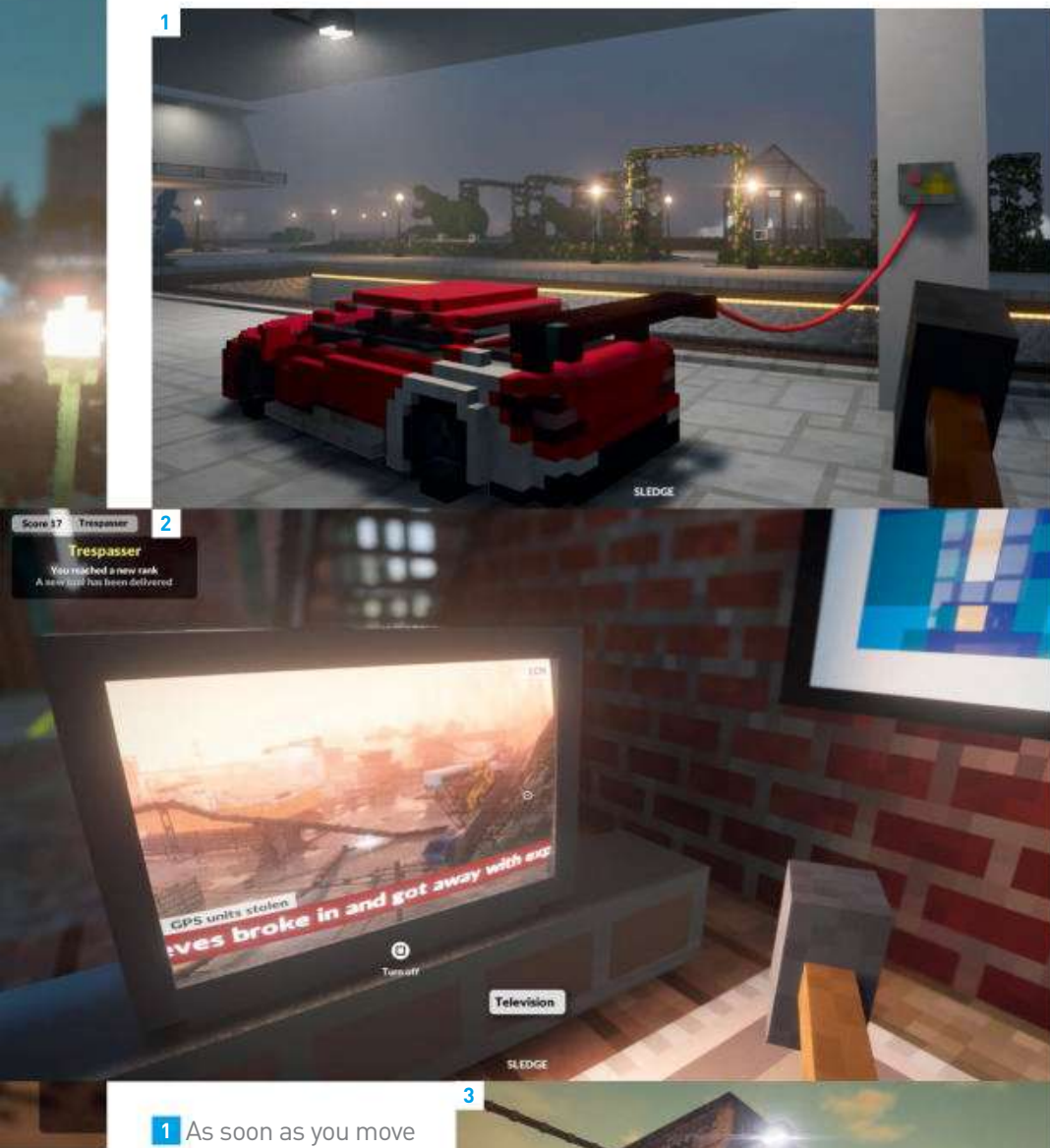
NERVES OF STEAL

Your task, therefore, is (usually) to plot – and, indeed, create – the best possible route from wherever you decide your starting point is to your escape vehicle, making sure you complete your objectives along the way. You are given a lot of

freedom in your approach to this. Making your own doorways is useful (and great fun), but that's just one step on the path to criminal success.

Each map contains vehicles, and while it's entirely up to you how you use them, they very quickly become essential to completing your theft and getting away with it. Slow and heavy construction vehicles can be used to quickly demolish walls, for example, or can be used as platforms or ramps. Boats are needed for crossing bodies of water at a decent speed, and cars can quickly close gaps on the ground. Then there's the fact that you unlock tools to connect objects to one another, and some vehicles can pick up or carry things... in

Your task, therefore, is (usually) to plot – and, indeed, create – the best possible route.



1 As soon as you move that car, an alarm will sound. Planning ahead is essential. **2** Between missions, you see your naughtiness reported on local TV. **3** Where there's a will, there's a way to make a new, unique, and destructive path.



short, two different people will be able to take very different approaches to the same mission.

Quicksaves encourage experimentation (although they're wiped if you quit the game), and we love the fact that fundamental elements such as alarm time and health can be tweaked for players who need it. Speaking of accessibility, it's utterly baffling that Teardown has launched without the ability to invert the Y-axis, but we're assured this is on the way.

BREAK FAST

A fun and highly replayable campaign is backed up by a sandbox mode, which allows you to play around in a map of your choice with infinite tool use and no having to worry about fail states. PS5 doesn't support mod

creation, sadly, but there's a free mod pack available that includes a bunch of the best PC ones, including a dog that follows you around everywhere while you do crimes.

The physics can be your best friend or your worst enemy. Gravity sometimes works as you'd expect, making quick demolitions or destructive shortcuts possible. Sometimes it doesn't, though, with large structures oddly resilient to a fundamental force of nature. Additionally, vehicles can get caught on (or even damaged by) bits of ground that you really don't think they ought to. These are minor complaints in the bigger destructive picture, however, annoyances that you'll gleefully blow your way through on your way to the next job.



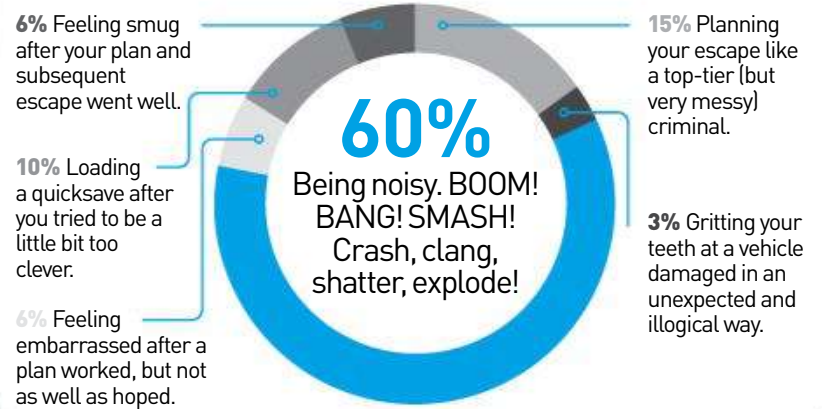
With immense scope for creativity and an admirable approach to customising the experience, Teardown smashes it. You can break this in all the right ways. **Luke Kemp**

8

PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TEARDOWN



HOW TO... UPGRADE TOOLS



Tools are upgraded at your computer, and you need cash. Lots of it. During missions, take the time to open cupboards and explore nooks and crannies (such as under elevators) for valuables, some of which give you huge cash boosts. You're already a criminal; why not go all-in?

STATPACK

120

Frames per second is an option, if your TV supports it. We imagine that those voxel graphics make smooth framerates easier to achieve!

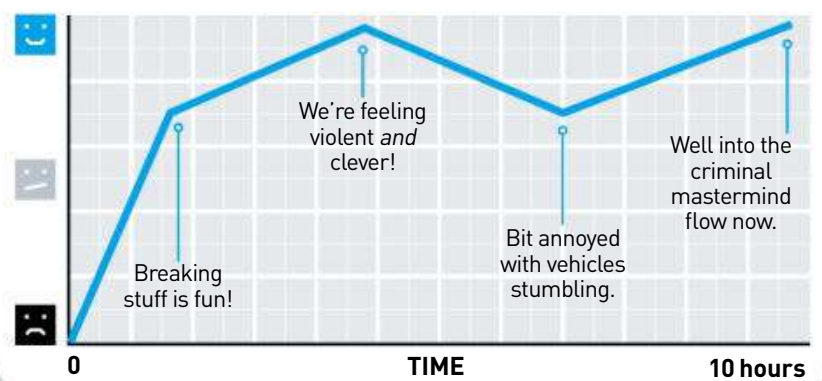
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Mods are available for the game once you download the free mod pack. They include new tools and maps, and even a racing minigame.

10

Maps in total, outside of the mods. Although locations are reused throughout the campaign, the mission structures ensure they never feel old.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH



TROPHY CABINET



WHOOPS

BRONZE

Destroy 1,000,000 voxels. Just keep playing and you'll hit this eventually!



MCFLY

SILVER

Get a car to 88mph. You'll want a sporty number and plenty of clear space for this.



BARE BONES

GOLD

Finish a mission without using any tools. Easier in some missions than others.



Warhammer Age Of Sigmar: Realms Of Ruin

Not all Gloam and doom



INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £49.99 (Standard), £59.99 (Deluxe), £64.99 (Ultimate)
ETA Out now
PUB Frontier Developments
DEV Frontier Developments
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 20 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Brightness settings; colourblind support; tinnitus filtering; adjustable subtitle size, colour and font; HUD adjustments; mono audio mode; UI scaling; tutorial tips always available

You don't need to look far to find Warhammer games on PlayStation, but *Realms Of Ruin* is something of a rarity. Most games stick with Old World-era campaigns or 40K, neglecting the Age Of Sigmar setting. That makes this an interesting choice by Frontier. However, while it had potential, it's another middling real-time strategy game.

It's set in the Mortal Realms, and you play as the Stormcast Eternals, fierce warriors who basically feel like magic Space Marines. You're tasked with defending Harkanibus, a Ghur city that's faced relentless assaults from the Orruk Kruleboyz. A quest for ancient, powerful artefacts to stop them isn't an especially original premise, but there's an enjoyable story that doesn't require much prior understanding of Age Of Sigmar. Rounding out this story are two further factions, the supernatural Nighthaunt and the Disciples Of Tzeentch.

A mission-based campaign follows and, like many strategy games, *Realms Of Ruin* opts for a rock-paper-scissors approach to combat. Offensive units beat Defensive, Defensive beat Ranged, and Ranged beat Offensive. Unit types are boosted by special unit abilities such as Demochrios' chain lightning or Vanguard Hunters' temporary invisibility. It's a simple but effective approach that encourages you to keep your armies varied

and avoids bogging you down in the particulars of combat.

CELESTIAL MADNESS

It's an enjoyable adventure with polished presentation, though you can tell Frontier has streamlined gameplay for consoles. That both benefits and hinders *Realms Of Ruin*. The slower pace allows for better unit management within these large maps, and though we wouldn't call this a base-building game, you can outfit particular locations for specific tasks, like setting up defensive turrets. They're useful options, but combat mechanics lack any real depth beyond this.

Making this worse is the amount of micromanaging individual units require. You can

tell them where to go, but if you don't issue specific instructions your forces often just sit around waiting, even if enemies aren't that far away. We aren't fond of all the back-and-forth across maps, either – enemies often respawn behind you. While the 'DirectStep' controls let you shift quickly between units, it's not especially intuitive.

Managing units often feels like a chore, and so we aren't inclined to stick around with the online multiplayer. Neither casual nor ranked play hold our interest for long, though the ability to create multiplayer maps is welcome. Still, Conquest mode is another nice bonus as that lets you select any of the four factions, battling across a randomly generated map.



An enjoyable Age Of Sigmar campaign, nicely presented and newcomer-friendly, but convoluted controls hamper yet another RTS game on console. **Henry Stockdale**



INFO

FORMAT PS4 PRICE £14.99 ETA Out now
PUB Focus Entertainment DEV Rundisc



Chants Of Sennaar

Keeping your language streak

Ever felt like you're missing something? That's what *Chants* is all about, starting when you wake up at the bottom of a tower unable to understand not one but four languages, spoken by the different inhabitants of each storey.

But that doesn't mean you're unable to interpret them. As players, we're used to puzzling things out – and these slices of different cultures we can wander around as we search for a way up the tower are essentially puzzles.

WORD UP

When each of a bunch of robed monks says the same thing on meeting you, perhaps that's a greeting? When they point, are they talking about the object, or

Prodding at the world, wandering around, reading signs, and talking to people genuinely makes you feel like you're working under your own steam. There's a built-in system for noting any meanings you've inferred in a kind of dictionary (though PS5's UI is a little clunky to type in). Collect all the glyphs of a particular set, often three or four, and you're able to commit to linking the glyphs to those meanings. Obra-Dinn-style, you're only told the words are correct when the entire group is, meaning you can't simply guess but that there is room to take some shots in the dark.

Plenty of 'aha' moments make you feel great, and it's fun to tinker with a puzzle as you work towards those. But it's not so elegant when you get stuck,

These slices of different cultures we can wander around are essentially puzzles.

the action they want you to take? Each language's glyphs are well-designed, and concepts are shared, so you can draw relations between them. For instance, some glyphs may be made up of ones you know with new shapes surrounding them, altering their meaning in a consistent way. (Something that is true in some real languages.)

sections of the tower requiring far too much walking back and forth to double-check glyphs which really get in the way of figuring it out. A surprising number of simple-yet-dull traversal puzzles and stealth segments also get in the way. Crouching behind cover, in this instance, is much less exciting than having our noses in a book.



Going full detective on figuring out these languages can be joyous, though other, duller, modes of play can get in the way more often than we'd like. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

7

PLAY

THREE TO PLAY



PSN games you might have missed



Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're digging deep (literally), stealing from steampunk nobility, and going ham on dino aliens.



You've my axe! Pickaxe, anyway, as we set out to conquer **The Lord Of The Rings: Return To Moria**. Focusing on Middle-earth's dwarves, this is a surprisingly

fresh angle for a LOTR game, mixing hefty dwarven combat as you plumb the depths with crafting using the ore you find – all while making sure you have plenty to eat (and, of course, booze to drink). For the Hobbit lovers out there, the dwarves have always been underrated stars of Tolkien's classics, and this understands the assignment. While it's not quite as finely polished as *Deep Rock Galactic*, Middle-earth heads will enjoy the delve.



From stuffing your pockets with resources to coins to give to the poor, we've co-op brawler **Gangs Of Sherwood**.

Not to be confused with *Hood: Outlaws & Legends* (a live service heister that didn't take off), this is a mission-based affair that can also be played solo. After King Richard returned from the Med with a mysterious stone, the Lionheart, England has fallen into a steampunk hyper-industrialist age, the land ravaged and the populace squeezed for every penny. Which means brawling through heaps of fights by mashing light and heavy attacks to obtain S-ranks, natch. It's a fine time, if a bit janky – one for a few evenings with mates.

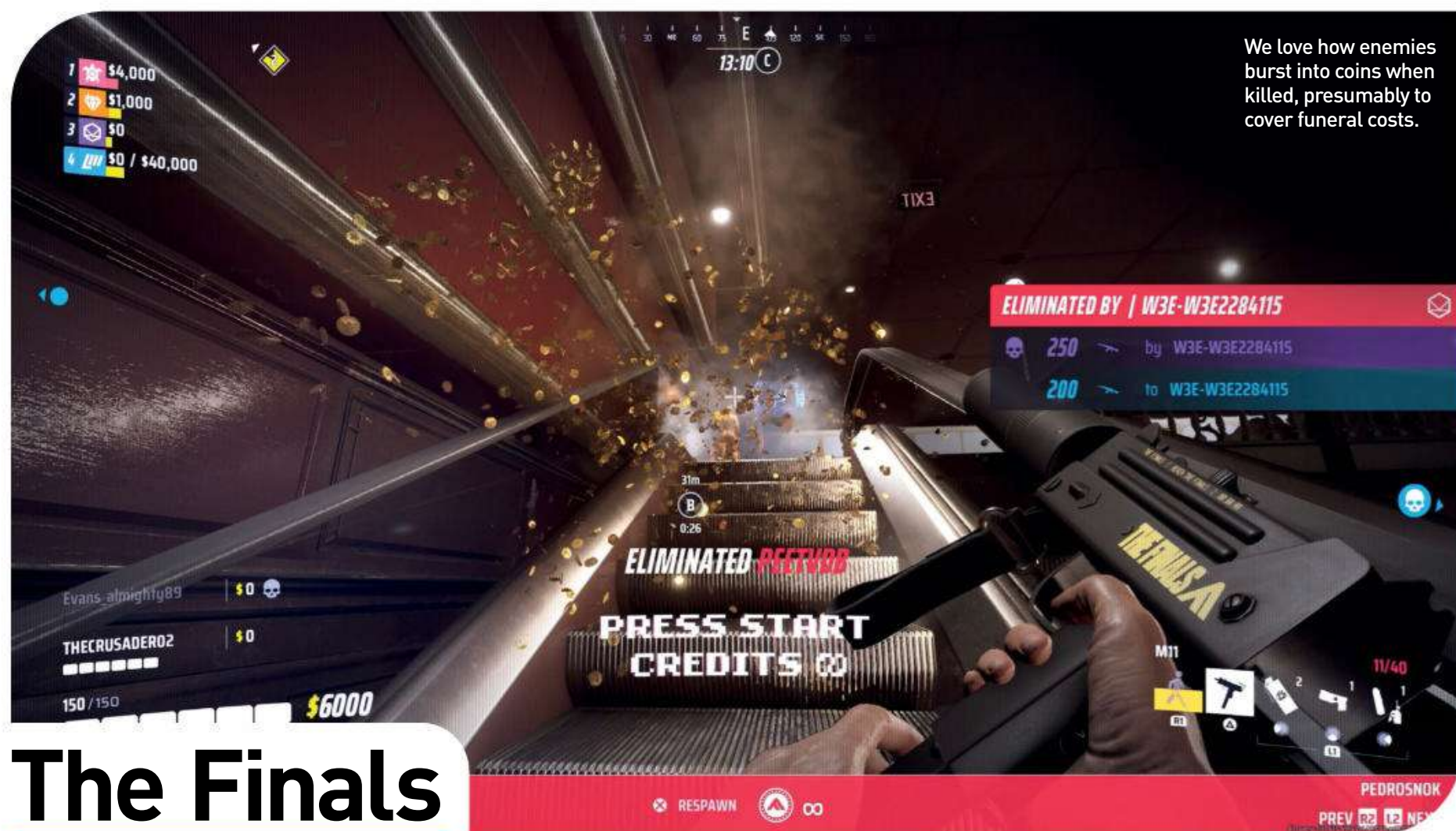


If you thought that was a bit old-school, then get ready for **Turok 3: Shadow Of Oblivion Remastered**. Originally released for N64 in 2000, it's been cleaned up with heaps

of love by Nightdive Studios (which is becoming the studio for polishing up vintage FPSes). With Joshua Fireseed out of action, it falls to Danielle or Joseph to take up the mantle of Turok and time-hop their way through many levels filled with dino-aliens that are awaiting a blasting. (Danielle can jump higher and grapple, while Joseph is able to squeeze through small gaps and use a sniper rifle – a reason to replay!) There are secret areas, no firing down sights, and no reloading, making this proper retro action. While faithful to the original, this is a lovely, slick release that retains some low draw distance for aesthetic reasons without being annoying.

ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit



We love how enemies burst into coins when killed, presumably to cover funeral costs.

The Finals

A free-to-play game about stealing your money. Wait, come back!



Few things are as satisfying as murder and stealing. They're also fun in videogames, which is why we've spent most of our time out on bail this month enjoying free-to-play team FPS *The Finals*.

You play as part of a team of three – one heavy (big health, slow movement), one light (stealthy, but weak), and one medium (take a wild guess) – competing with other teams to stash a set amount of money. In Bank It, our favourite mode, kill an opponent and they'll drop \$1,000. That's more than most print game journalists make in a lifetime, but small change compared to the major payouts an in-game vault offers. These hold several thousand dollars, are marked on the map for everyone to see, and take an infuriatingly long time to give up their dosh.

Intentionally infuriatingly, mind, with their countdown timers bringing back fond memories of *Payday 2*. Once you've got money you need to bank it before another player kills you and loots it for themselves, bringing back fond memories of *Titanfall 2*. Running around the map trying desperately to bank your winnings is terrifically tense, especially when you remember you can blow up buildings to forge your own routes, bringing back fond

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PUB Embark Studios
DEV Embark Studios
YEAR 2023

memories of *Battlefield*. Constantly reminding us of three other great multiplayer games is no bad thing, even if it does leave *The Finals* somewhat lacking a killer hook of its own. Blowing up buildings to make personal paths is still a literal blast and banking a jackpot feels like *winning* the jackpot. We've been putting off writing this to play 'just one

means you spend way too much time merely spectating, bringing back far *less* fond memories of *Battlefield*. Perhaps this would be less of an issue if the game show-aping presentation weren't so obnoxious. We suspect it's so the marketing can say 'THE WORLD'S GREATEST FREE-TO-PLAY COMBAT GAME-' and hope you've stopped

The insipid commentary is irritating enough to inspire the next John Connor.

more game' for hours now, which is always a good sign.

SHORT CHANGED

We're less sold on the oxymoronic Quick Cash mode, where revives are limited. Having to choose if/when you revive introduces some interesting strategy but also

reading before '-SHOW'. The insipid commentary, apparently powered by the amazing future-tech of AI, is irritating enough to inspire the next John Connor. Still, these are nitpicks about what's otherwise a great debut, one well worth investing some time in. [Abbie Stone](#)

Resident Evil 4 VR Mode

Screaming all the way home

INFO **FORMAT** PSVR2 **PUB** Capcom
DEV Capcom **YEAR** 2023



As Leon S. Kennedy embarks on a rescue mission somewhere in an extremely rural

part of Spain, his police escort asks him point-blank: “Why did you come to this horrible place?” Donning the headset and touring through the optional VR shooting tutorial, you’ll ask yourself a very similar question: why am I doing this to myself?

The regular remake is enough to give anyone the willies, and we find strapping the action to our faces does the opposite of



third-person cinematics often provides an unexpectedly welcome reprieve from the tension, though it’s no small amount of fun inching around corners, keeping a beady little eye out for possible ambushes, and popping assailants before they can jump out.

But during the village siege, we become all thumbs. Hearing the dreaded click of an empty

■ We find strapping the action to our faces does the opposite of defanging the horror. ■

defanging the horror, even when we know full well what’s to come. Despite imperfectly implemented smaller details, such as the odd texture floating about an inch above the associated surface, this is an excellently immersive experience that will have you by the throat – no Lady Dimitrescu chokeslams necessary.

Occasional cuts to uncanny first-person cutscenes still happen, though naturally far less frequently than in Village’s VR mode. Breaking away into

magazine, we reach for more ammo – only for our sticky fingers to keep picking up the combat knife strapped to our chest. It’s incredibly satisfying to shank shambling enemies, but when you’re not yet ready to let the welcoming committee get within biting distance that’s less than ideal. The best move in this situation? Shake off your nerves in the pause menu, then make full use of your pistol’s laser sights and end the party early. Now you’re doing this to them. **Jess Kinghorn**

Whether you crawl or run through this village of the damned, it’s even better in VR.



Valhalla is influenced by Kratos’ memories, leading to some neat fusions of Norse and Greek mythology.

God Of War Ragnarök: Valhalla

Kratos reclasses to rogue

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** Sony
DEV Santa Monica Studio **YEAR** 2023 (2022 base game)



Fellow roguelike liker? Well, if you enjoy God Of War you need to play this. You need

to! **This is not a silly bonus mode. We repeat: this is not a silly bonus!**

Considering this is free DLC that dropped days after it was announced, and is accessed from the main menu rather than your personal save, you could be forgiven for thinking it was a little thing thrown together to give you more opportunity massacre legions of Norse monsters.

And it is. But just as the stories in the base game are

dig up some Ancient Greek trauma for the axe daddy.

Which means that even though you can boot it up whenever you like, you should hold fire if you haven’t hit credits yet. Gear features, but only cosmetically, and your skill tree doesn’t matter as every node is unlocked here by default (which does leave us wondering whether the base game would be better off simply ditching gear and skill unlocks and giving you everything right from the start). You can temporarily unlock other skills, such as special runic attacks, as you go, as well as boosts to certain moves and stats.

■ Kratos and Mimir explore the realm of the dead, dealing with fallout from the main game. ■

elegantly woven throughout modes of interaction, with important conversations happening as you explore, the same holds true here. As Kratos and Mimir set out to explore the realm of the dead, they deal with the fallout from the main game, ponder the consequences, and

In some ways the narrative focus makes getting into this one a bit of a slow burn for real roguelike heads, but the combat and depth ratchet up as you progress. Needless to say, we’re impressed; there’s a lot here for everyone, and it feels like a must-play addition. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**



PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01



Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and ‘yes, and-ing’ your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city’s saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.



02



Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy’s characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03



Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane’s detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you’ll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt’s trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04



Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5’s power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05



God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it’s a gorgeous end to the world.

06



Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you’ve not heard one quite like this before.

07



Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

08



Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake’s final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

09



Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Cloud and the gang get a glow up with better visuals and slicker combat that Limit Breaks this bold reimaging of the Midgar section. Yuffie joins in with an extra story that bridges the gap between this and what’s to come, cleverly playing on nostalgia and fan expectation.

10



Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11



Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden’s mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy’s use of ray tracing is among the best we’ve seen. The sole problem is you’re able to pick only one of two visual options.

12



Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13



Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47’s latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO’s new PS5-developed engine. That’s a lot of content.

14



Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity’s saviour.

15



Final Fantasy XVI

With a mixture of DMC-like action and a mature story peppered with wonderfully deployed regional slang (like ‘nowt’s) this reinvention feels fresh while also building on past entries’ themes. Lacking quirky edges, it’s almost too polished – but it’s still a treat.

16



Astro's Playroom

Free and pre-installed on your PS5, this is more than a showcase for your new console's best, most innovative features. Astro's Playroom is a beautifully crafted, if short-lived, platform adventure that takes a tour through everything that makes PS5 so special.

17



Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18



Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

19



Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

20



Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

21



Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

22



EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

23



Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A soulslike without stamina? It's just one of the many clever twists in this Ancient Chinese epic where qi governs your actions instead. Go on a tear, and positive energy (for you, not your dead foes) helps you keep the momentum going. Just don't let negative energy build.

24



Marvel's Midnight Suns

Mushroom-foraging friendship dates, a book club with Blade, and the Sorcerer Supreme's suspiciously small swimming trunks – this one's got it all. A deep affection for all things Marvel runs through this deck building RPG, and the writing and social mechanics charm.

25



Labyrinth Of Galleria: The Moon Society

Think outside the grid in this dungeon crawler. Break down the maze walls to reveal hidden chambers, jack up your party's attacks, and transfer cat skills into clowns (seriously) to master this devious RPG.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more?
Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5



Street Fighter 6 smashed all our expectations with its vibrant energy. World Tour story mode is an approachable introduction for newbies, while the return of parries and a quirky roster offers a lot of depth for longtime fans. Here are three more games worthy of going toe-to-toe in.

PICK #1



Yakuza 0

Hitting the streets

Pounding the pavement, putting up your dukes in random encounters with fighty strangers – Street Fighter 6's World Tour mode feels undeniably Yakuza-like. If you're not familiar with this long-running crime drama series, 0 is an exceptional starting point. Set in 1988, the intertwined origin stories of tortured antihero Goro Majima and gangster-with-a-heart-of-gold Kiryu Kazuma unspool. And each lad offers a selection of unique fighting styles.

PICK #2



Street Fighter Alpha 3

Not old but classic

Featuring its own World Tour mode, it's hard to ignore how much of this is echoed by the latest 3D release. One of the final entries to feature gorgeous 2D sprite work (alongside SF3 which, yes, is different to this) and offering a heap of different ways to throw down, it's a classic for a reason. Available as part of the Street Fighter 30th Anniversary Collection or as an add-on for the otherwise free Capcom Arcade 2nd Stadium, it's worth going back for a few rounds.

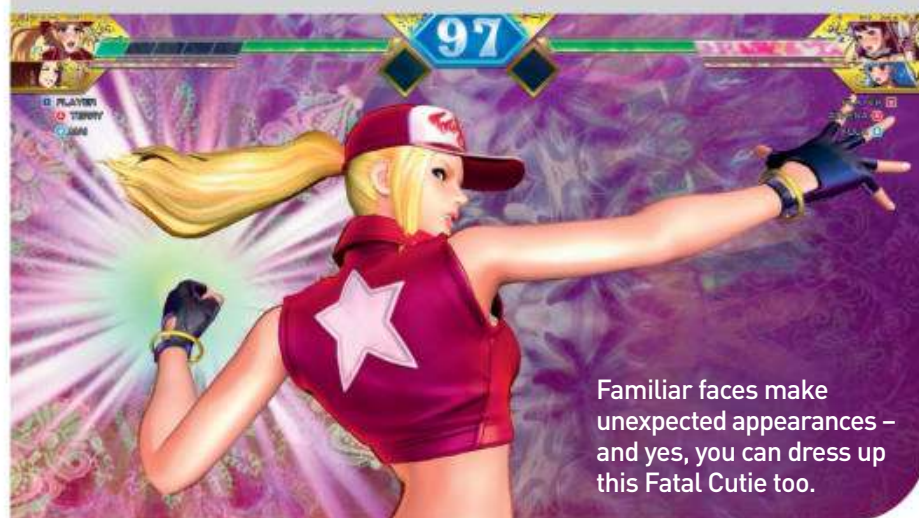
PICK #3



SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy

These damsels are the distress

Trapped in weird costumes in a bizarre mansion – no, it's not an anime convention. Instead King Of Fighters contestants have been kidnapped for the amusement of a shadowy force. It sounds like a horrifying setup but turns out to be a breezy tag team fighter with more of a party game vibe. Here, to take you out of the running, the opposition needs to land a Dream Finish special move on you. It's a fresh mechanic that goes a long way towards making things welcoming.



Familiar faces make unexpected appearances – and yes, you can dress up this Fatal Cutie too.



PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES



01



Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02



Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03



God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04



The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05



Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is an epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08



Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09



Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10



Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11



Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12



Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13



Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14



Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15



Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16



Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17



Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18



Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19



Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20



Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21



Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22



Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23



Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24



Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25



Tekken 7: Definitive Edition

The title for best fighter on PS4 is fiercely fought over, but for our prize money King remains the, er, king. Easy to pick up, with plenty of depth, few fighters feel quite as crunchy as this. With all DLC characters now released, from Noctis to Negan, it's time to get sweaty.



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UNDER £20



Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga

£17.99 approx (PS5/PS4, [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk))

The value is strong with this one

Encompassing all nine Star Wars movies, this revitalisation of the Lego enemy-bashing platformer games is packed full of things to keep you busy, just like the best of the brick sets. Little open world areas are filled with secrets, and the missions are comical twists on the well-known plot beats from the films with full (and new) voice acting. While these have featured in prior games in the series, the ones here are complete reimaginings rather than remasters of what's gone before. Some Amazon editions even come with classic character DLC to add to the huge roster.

UNDER £15



Sega Mega Drive Classics

£14.99 approx (PS4, [ebay.co.uk](https://www.ebay.co.uk))

One price, over 50 games

Thought Skywalker Saga was good value? This massive collection of the 16-bit console's biggest hitters has a huge library of games that you'll keep coming back to. While not all games from the '90s were created equal, the ones here are the cream of the crop. You've got a host of Sonic games, decent grappler Ristar, and the more technical ninja-star-throwing of Revenge Of Shinobi, to name just a few. There's lots to keep multiplayer lovers happy as well, including all three Streets Of Rage and Golden Axe games (with region options), Gunstar Heroes, and more.

UNDER £10



Balan Wonderworld

£9.99 approx (PS5, [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk))

Don't you dare close your eyes

You may have seen lots of clowning around about this platformer from Sonic's creators. And we'll admit, it is a bit of an odd one. Aimed at little ones, this is a sort of My First Platformer that prides itself on simplicity of play, having you run around colourful worlds with never more than one interaction button to accompany your analogue stick controls. This changes contextually based on costumes you can collect, from Pumpkin Puncher's rocket fists to Soaring Sheep's gliding jumps, and loads more. Take it for what it is, and there's actually lots to enjoy here.



Each world has you aiding people in distress. Here, you help a firefighter face his fears.



PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01



Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.



02



Horizon: Call of the Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

03



Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber wagging too.

04



Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05



Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06



No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07



Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your lil' hero, Quill.

08



Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

09



Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

10



Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

11



The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

12



The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

13



Jurassic World Aftermath Collection

Clever girls for a clever game. You're looking to salvage research data from the dino park's ruins and get out alive, all while being hunted by 'raptors (like the tense scene from the original movie). Other dinos pop up, but the velociraptors are the focus, for better and worse.

14



What The Bat?

With your arms transformed into baseball bats, you must progress through loads of minigames that take you through different periods in your life. A great way to get used to 1:1 hand-tracking, the zany challenges are only let down by a slight lack of variety.

15



Tentacular

Get *stuck* into this coming-of-age story where you play as an adopted sea monster finding their place in their seaside town community. Joy comes from playful, wholesome interaction, using your twisty appendages to grapple with problems and suckers to pick things up.



PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01



Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02



The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03



Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04



Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05



Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06



Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07



Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08



Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09



To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10



I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

REVIEW



WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

Last month's PS Plus was all about... well, if not going fast then making meaningful forward motion nonetheless.

Lego 2K Drive on PS4 and PS5 had us thinking speed was the name of the game, but **Sable** on PS5 encouraged us to stop and appreciate the desert's roses.

That more contemplative pacing pairs particularly well with PS Plus' third offering and the focus of this month's column:

PowerWash Simulator.

Available on both PS5 and PS4, this chill simulation game scrubs away the dirt to reveal squeaky-clean success.

Chances are you've seen at least one incredibly satisfying power washing video online and you already understand what developer FuturLab's latest is all about. Otherwise, here's the pitch: a grimewave has hit the town of Muckingham and your small power-washing business is in the right place at the right time.

Your clients are an eclectic bunch, requiring your services to make everything from their back garden to their suspiciously familiar defensive mech sparkle.

As the game's published by Square Enix, settings from Final Fantasy and Tomb Raider get their grime on in a selection of free DLC (whether you picked the game up as part of PS Plus or otherwise). Giving Final Fantasy VII's Guard Scorpion a rinse in the Midgar Special Pack is a particular highlight.

Wading through a big, grubby job only to come out the other side of it sparkling is an almost meditative experience. Many jobs are surprisingly complex, often leaving you scouting around for that one bit of grit still clinging on, keeping you from that 100% job completion. Who knew so much mud could get squirrelled away between Scorpion's servos? And all that's to say nothing of the simple joy of messing about with all sorts of nozzles.



It's a dirty job but someone's gotta do it. With the right nozzle for the right cranny, you'll make this Scorpion sparkle!

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RetroStation



097 A brief history of...

Gran Turismo roars off the road and into our history class

HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: DIGIMON WORLD [092](#) | DEFENDING: VAAN [093](#) | CLASSIC GAME: MORTAL KOMBAT: DEADLY ALLIANCE [094](#) | PLUS POINTS: PARAPPA THE RAPPER 2 [096](#)
A BRIEF HISTORY OF... GRAN TURISMO [097](#) | PARTING SHOT: THE EVIL WITHIN [098](#)



DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these January moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?



5 YEARS

Resident Evil 2's impressive remake proved that third-person Resi still had legs, which were much needed for escaping the revised and more dynamic stalker Mr X. The oversized tyrant chases you all around the police station.



15 YEARS

Given the film trilogy's large-scale battles, applying the Star Wars: Battlefront formula to Middle-earth in The Lords Of The Rings: Conquest should have worked better than it did. A memorable misfire, the fighting and objectives were just a bit too ropy.



20 YEARS

With its cinematic storyline at the forefront, Mafia was an impressive feat on PS2. Unfortunately it hit the console two years after PC, and GTA sequels had moved the crime sandbox forwards. Its recent remake is rather good.

MEMORY CARD

Digimon World

25 years on, this creature raiser is like little else



Every stat has to be developed one session at a time. Building the Digimon you want takes serious commitment.



With the Digimon anime becoming a sensation and Nintendo's own creature features' popularity peaking, Digimon World seemed poised to be a massive success. When it was released, however, it wasn't quite what anyone expected. Even so, this tough and obtuse adventure remains unique.

"I was 10 and all my digimon turned to poop," shares @KeepDrawingChar. That this bizarre statement isn't uncommon sums up the game perfectly. Riffing on the Tamagotchi-like Digimon LCD devices more than the cartoon, your player character is sucked into the digital world where they have to set out into dangerous environments while raising a partner correctly, in order to reassemble a city. The game frequently felt punishing, with your pal dying if it lost too many battles (after which it would have to be reborn). And if you allowed it to poop on the ground too often it would turn into a turd-shaped sukemon.

"Good game but it was tough and I had no idea what I was doing lol," says Chris Oates. Phillip Wennell agrees: "[I] was too young to properly appreciate the game mechanics."

DIGITAL CHAMPIONS

Being difficult to understand lent it a air of mystery, and made your victories all the more satisfying. "The level of achievement when you actually got a Champion-level digimon," says Ed Knowles. With multiple stats to develop and loads of secret conditions, getting a decent higher-level digimon was a real feat. And as they



INFO

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RELEASE 1999
IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
Digimon World 2003 is a more conventional RPG; Monster Rancher has more intricate creature rearing

had a natural lifespan, your time with them was limited – meaning a rush to unearth File Island's most distant, deadliest areas.

While it was followed by direct sequels and plenty of other Digimon games, none really had the same spirit, being more conventional and easier to grok. But this first one remains memorable. "Better than Pokémon," says @Byronb_86. After all, here your digi-pals' lives were well and truly in your hands.

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

1,000,000

This many copies and more sold worldwide, qualifying the game for Greatest Hits status in many regions.

15 05

Final, Ultimate-level digimon forms. To this day, some of the conditions for getting them are hotly debated.

Tiers of commands to give your digimon in battle. With few direct commands to issue, winning's on them.



Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

DEFENDING

Vaan

FFXII's little scamp may be naïve and annoying, but he shows the most growth argues Daniella Lucas

Often considered the weakest character in Final Fantasy XII, there was a point in the game's development when Vaan wasn't going to exist. Instead the main hero was going to be someone much older – but then their traits were given to Basch and Balthier out of fear players would only want to play as a younger lead. Vaan is just a street urchin in a party full of knights, sky pirates, and fallen princesses – a simple boy somehow becoming the principal actor in a story of revenge and toppling empires.

Some might argue that he's out of place among his fellows, but that's also exactly why he's so perfect for the team – he gives everyone the pushback and reality check they need to make the right decisions. While Ashe will do anything to get the power she needs to reclaim her kingdom, it's Vaan who reminds her to look past her need for revenge. Without him she would continue the cycle of war and death in Ivalice.

Vaan is the everyman the game needs, not just to guide us through the story, but to keep everyone else in check. He gives hope to Basch by reminding him of the citizens he fights for, and Fran the courage she needs to go back to her home village, just because they see this simple young man joining the fight for freedom even though he comes from nowhere. Even Balthier is encouraged to join the cause instead of ignoring it all in favour of the free life of a sky pirate by witnessing Vaan's optimism and bravery.

He may be annoying and a show-off, but without Vaan Ivalice would have fallen. He's the glue that holds the disparate crew together, and he genuinely deserves the title of main character.

I'M CAPTAIN BASCH FON ROSENBERG OF DALMASCA! DON'T LISTEN TO ONDORE'S LIES! BASCH LIVES!"

You've got to admire the chutzpah of shouting at complete strangers in public without feeling any embarrassment whatsoever.



INFO

MAIN GAMES
Final Fantasy XII:
The Zodiac Age

STATS

The original PS2 version of the game had one big License board rather than several role-based ones.

Vaan has the best all-round stats of the entire party, making him a potent fighter.

While most Final Fantasy games have unique settings, FFXII shares its setting with Vagrant Story and FF: Tactics.

SPIN-OFFS

Dissidia Final Fantasy,
Theatrhythm Final Fantasy

HOW TO PLAY?

Amazon, £15



CLASSIC GAME

Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance

It's not silent but it's very, very deadly





Two evil sorcerers walk into a bar – okay, into a Mortal Kombat tournament – forming a deadly alliance to, well, conquer the realms. Hence the title. Having transitioned into the 3D era and ditched pre-console arcade releases in the latter half of the '90s with MK4 and MK Gold, the Mortal Kombat series entered a dry spell buoyed only by a series of misfires. Here's looking at you, Mortal Kombat: Special Forces. And who could forget that cinematic abomination, Mortal Kombat: Annihilation?

Deadly Alliance got things back on track. It was the first in the series to land on the PS2 generation, launching in 2002. It introduced some fresh faces to the roster, including new favourites who later became series staples, including Kenshi, Frost, Li Mei, and Nitara. They stood tall amid a galaxy of stars as glittering as Sub Zero, Scorpion, Kung Lao, Kitana, Shang Tsung, Sonya Blade, Reptile, Jax Briggs, and Kano.

Interestingly, this was the first entry (and to this day, possibly the only entry) not to feature Liu Kang as a playable

outfit, which was basically a clone of Ryu from Street Fighter.

NEW BLOOD

In some ways Deadly Alliance was a return to series roots. Even the block-breaking minigame Test Your Might returned from the original game for the first time. But we also got Test Your Sight, where the MK logo was hidden behind a cup, the cups shuffled around, and you had to guess which cup the logo was behind, at varying difficulty levels. Really, it's a mode that exists only to justify a pretty fatal pun. Classic arcade mode also returned, in which characters would fight their way through enemies to earn their own arcade-style endings and face off against the monstrous (and unplayable) Moloch.

But Deadly Alliance is also the entry that first shifted towards a focus on single-player action with its Konquest mode, a cinematic single-player adventure that saw Quan Chi and Shang Tsung forming a, well, fatal friendship. This would pave the way for the inclusion of more ambitious campaigns in future instalments, which has become a defining element of the series.

“One of the most memorable aspects was the techno-tastic music on the character select screen.”

character, as he gets shockingly killed off in the opening cinematic cutscene. But let's not forget some of the much-maligned characters this game bestowed upon us, including drunken master Bo Rai Cho and Hsu Hao, who now lives on as a decapitated head in Erron Black's intro animation in MK11. It also threw a few completely lacklustre and forgettable fighters our way, such as Mavado and Drahmin. Looking back, there were some very questionable alternate costumes too, such as Jax's alternate outfit, which makes him look a lot like 50 Cent, and Kenshi's alternate

One of the most memorable aspects was the techno-tastic music on the character select screen. Boy is it catchy. So much so, that it is almost on a par with the theme from the 1995 movie. Then there was the introduction of the Krypt, consisting of 'koffins', which enable you to purchase and unlock a vast array of items, including arenas, alternate costumes, characters, concept art, videos, and images, with the in-game currency earned in Konquest mode and regular play.

Each character had three unique fighting styles – often two hand-to-hand

1 Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance is one of the shining gems of the series' 3D era. **2** Kenshi made his first appearance here, and would go on to be a big part of MK1's story. **3** Fighting styles appear at the bottom of the screen in big text. No surprises! **4** These PS2 graphics were a big step up from PS1's. **5** Well it is called a deadly alliance. 'Ave 'im!



INFO

PUB Midway Games

DEV Midway Games

RELEASED 2003

GET IT NOW £4.99, eBay

NEED TO KNOW

1 Deadly Alliance is the fifth main entry in the Mortal Kombat series.

2 It's the first game in the canon series made without the involvement of MK's co-creator John Tobias.

3 This is the only MK game that does not feature a vertical, tower-like arcade ladder.

styles and one weapon style – making them feel more unique to control. Conversely, iconic fatalities felt more limited with one per character, and utterly unimpressive animations, especially by today's standards (Quan Chi's model-distorting neck stretch is rubbish). There's also a very limited number of victory poses as most characters have exactly the same match-winning animations.

But while it's a product of its time, it still represents a pivotal moment in the long-running series, when the format that would define more modern entries began to take shape. And if the visuals haven't aged brilliantly, there's still something to be said for whaling on an opponent to the classic tunes. Shedding the skin of the wonkier PS1-era 3D games, Deadly Alliance set a course for future conquests, and you can sense its DNA even in Mortal Kombat 1 (the rebooted story nods to Deadly Alliance's), from a focus on more distinct skills for each character to the more cinematic story mode. ■



PLUS POINTS

PaRappa The Rapper 2

Hip hop to it, try not to screw it



You need to save a world of 2D creatures from a gang determined to turn all food into noodles. At one point, you're singing along with a horny onion who has his own TV show, and if that doesn't intrigue you then we really don't know what to tell ya.

This game is *wild*, and it stands up today extremely well. Partly this is due to the unique and striking art design, which soars above the technical limitations of PS2 and benefits further from a bit of modern HD polishing. The simple and familiar rhythm mechanics help too; you simply hit the buttons shown on screen in time with the music.

Then there's the soundtrack, which is primarily hip hop.¹ That certainly goes for the tracks that you tap your pad along to, and these songs are *great*. The lyrics are often a bit silly,² but that's all part of the charm, and besides, are you really expecting social commentary or deep, meaningful philosophy from a game that features an octopus who works as a hairdresser?

PET THE DOGG

You're expected to be surprisingly precise with your timing when compared to more recent rhythm games, and it only becomes more ruthless on higher difficulties. A runthrough takes less than 90 minutes – there are just eight tracks plus cutscenes in the whole game – but

PlayStation 2

INFO

PUB Sony

DEV NanaOn-Sha

RELEASED 2001

there are three new hats (in other words, difficulties) to unlock. There's an easy mode, though this won't help you that much when you get to the highest levels. Prepare for an extremely funky challenge.

This is perfectly suited to playing via PS Plus. It's very brief, lots of fun, and completely unlike anything you've played before (er, unless you've played the first game, that is). It's a crime against fun that the rapping hound has never been the star of a third game, but who knows? If the rereleases of this and the original can sweep up enough interest... we gotta believe!

FOOTNOTES ¹ PaRappa's girlfriend has a soulful number near the end, though. ² And sometimes double entendre-like. We think the songwriters knew exactly what they were doing.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice



I LIKED HOW THE GAME WOULD SHOW DAY AND NIGHT SCENES, BASED OFF THE REAL TIME OF DAY OUTSIDE."

Gregory James



NOT AS GOOD AS THE ORIGINAL."

James Lunt



LOVE 1 & 2!"

Karisu Jones

▶ Does PS Plus make **Gotham Knights** a more lively comic adventure?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF Gran Turismo

Looking back on 25 years of 'The Real Racing Simulator'



Gran Turismo was an instant PS1 classic in 1997. It had analogue control. Rumble. TV-style replays. *Reflections*.



1999's Gran Turismo 2 expanded the experience, including rally events. Mind your eyes on those jagged edges.



2001's Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec sealed PS2's reputation of being the Best Thing Ever. Nothing else came close.

GT4 was announced for PSP but didn't happen, despite promotional box art being made.

On 21 Jan we'll see the end of online for GT Sport. Dry those eyes. Last year's movie adaptation proved to one of gaming's best (though it's a low bar).

TEASE ME

How it worked before DLC

Outside the core series, there were 'Prologue' versions of GT4 and 5 to tide eager players over. There were also three 'Concept' releases on PS2: Gran Turismo Concept: Tokyo, Tokyo-Seoul, and Tokyo-Geneva. These boxed releases were low on content but they sold well. PS3 then received a downloadable demo dubbed 'HD Concept' featuring just one track set in the Alps.



THE DEFINITIVE GRAN TURISMO CONCEPT IS 2002'S TOKYO-GENEVA – IT'S GOT THE MOST CARS



2004's Gran Turismo 4 introduced the now-ubiquitous photo mode. Shiny.



Gran Turismo 6 literally went to the moon for a number of missions in 2013.



2010's Gran Turismo 5 added go-karts, when perhaps Polyphony should have concentrated on the HD upgrade for PS3. #JustSaying.



2017's GT Sport set the template for modern online racing games. As a simulation it is so convincing, its online championships became FIA certified.



OLD MASTER

25 years and still going strong

GT7 is arguably the finest racing game around. It was controversial at launch due to microtransactions being switched on and car prices raised *after* it had received glowing reviews, but it's still receiving new content like PSVR2 support. And its core dev team at Polyphony Digital remains unchanged after 25 years. Here's to the next 25.

▶ Next issue: how much history do the **sad dad games** have?



Shinji Mikami's Resident Evil throwback in **The Evil Within** remains one of the coolest nods in gaming

Connelly?" Your colleague had turned weird and attacked you in the ambulance. And now, after you've crawled from the burning wreckage, he's here, crouching over something. Or someone. Sebastian picks up Connelly's discarded gun. Something's not right. That's when the head of the victim hits the floor and rolls towards you. Then Connelly swivels his neck to look at you...

HAVE IT there's a flash of lightning and you can see his face. He doesn't look well, with veins outside his skin and a bit of his cheek missing. It's either one heck of a good Halloween getup or Oscar Connelly has become one of 'The Haunted', much like Resident Evil's Infected. But hey, like Juliet Capulet said: would a zombie by any other name not smell as bad?

Connelly's brain munching and slow look to camera are – mansion setting aside – a straight remake of the first zombie encounter in the original Resident Evil. The cynical could argue this throwback zaps you out of the experience, breaking your willing suspension of disbelief by being so massively self-referential, making you think about another game, about how this one is made by Shinji Mikami too, and how this moment is admittedly way cool. And then? Too much thinking, Connelly's munching on you too. Bravo, kid. 

You get to this gruesome moment within an hour after starting a new game (unless you really suck), but you do need to enjoy it the first time you see it, because killing Connelly for being a messy eater sets a checkpoint and he isn't there again on New Game+.

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 06 FEBRUARY

EXODUS

Where will the journey take you?

PLAY

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